鎌池和馬
イラスト／灰村キヨタカ
とある魔術の禁書目録（インデックス）12
電撃文庫

Toaru Majutsu no Index - Volume 12

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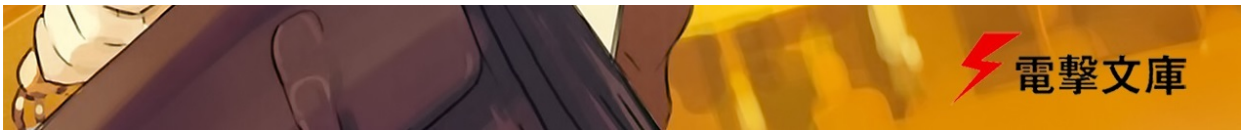

Toaru Majutsu no Index 12

September 30 — the time when seasons change in Academy City.

The Level 5 esper from the elite ojou school Tokiwadai Middle School, Misaka Mikoto, ignores the noisy atmosphere around her as she stands in front of the concert hall at the plaza.

She's waiting for someone.

However,

"...He's still not here yet."

"That boy' who should be punished hasn't appeared yet. Mikoto sighs as she carries the cheap school bag and violin case, waiting for him to turn up—

Once Kamijou Touma and Misaka Mikoto meet, the school-life love story involving the punishment game will now begin!

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とある魔術の禁書目録(インデックス)⑫

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Kamachi Kazuma

It seems like in this work, the season will be changing gradually to autumn. Speaking of autumn, autumn's said to increase the appetite and reading interest. Thus, when it's Index's turn, I wonder if it may increase even more?

(Products of Dengeki Bunko)

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Toaru Majutsu no Index 12

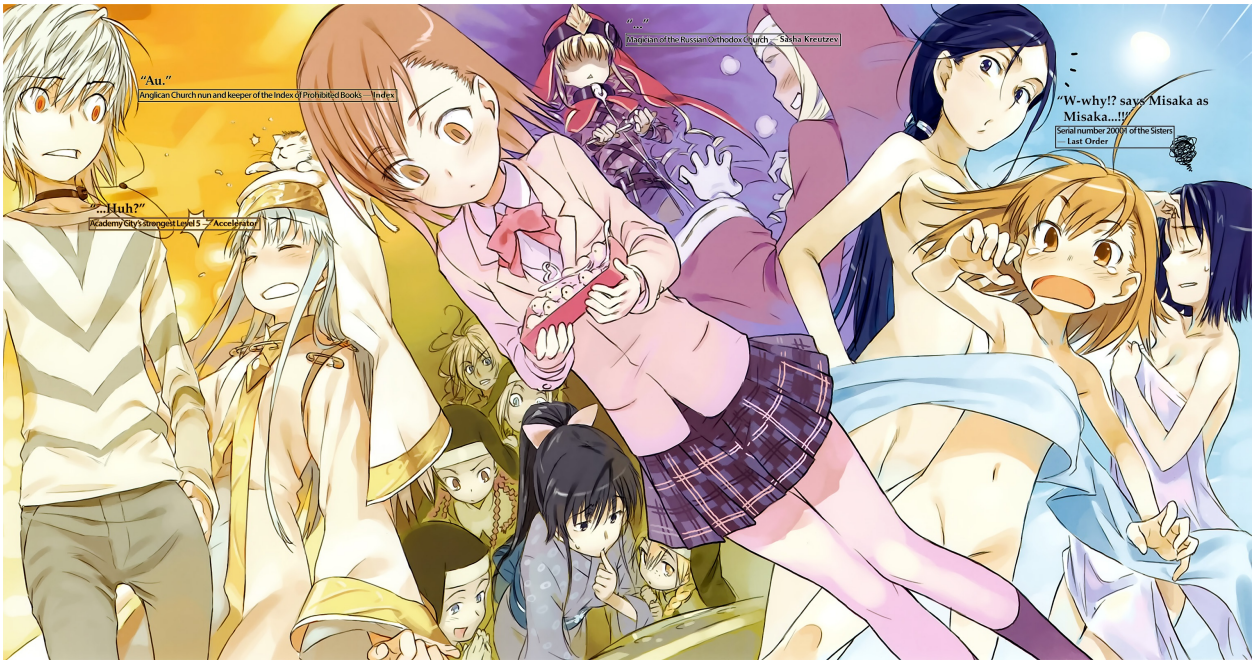
Illustrator: Haimura Kiyotaka

Born in 1973. Has decided to vacate and move out of the current apartment which he had been living in for about 4 years. Maybe he's in the midst of moving when this volume is published...?

カバー／表紙絵

とある魔術の禁書目録（インデックス）12

鎌池和馬
イラスト／灰村キヨタカ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Anglican Church nun and keeper of the Index of Prohibited Books — Index
"...Huh?"
Academy City's Strongest Level 5 — Accelerator
"..."
Magician of the Russian Orthodox Church — Sasha Kreutzev
"W-why!? save Misaka as Misaka...!!!"
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"ARCHBISHOP!!"
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"F-Fukiyose-chan?"
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"...Ah? That's still in effect?"
Academy City Level 0 — Kamijou Touma
"Penalty game ♪"
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Prologue: Shirai Kuroko, a Pillow, and a Bed. *Suffering_of_a_Negligee.*

Morning came early for Tokiwadai Middle School.

But even so, 5:20 AM was a little too early. At that time when the morning bird songs were only just beginning, the girl's dorm was normally wrapped in complete silence. Dorm life was often referred to as a single whole, but 80% of Academy City's 2.3 million residents were students, so there were many different types and varieties of dorm life. Even among all of those, Tokiwadai Middle School's regulations for curfew and lights out were stricter than most. (Although, certain Level 5s and Judgment members would occasionally sneak out.)

The outside dorm for Tokiwadai Middle School was no exception.

Shirai Kuroko may have been awake, but she was likely the only one.

She was rolling back and forth within her own bed.

It was not that she had woken up; she could not get to sleep.

She usually had thin ribbons tying her hair up on the left and right, but her hair was now spread out on the bed because she had removed them. She was wearing nothing but lacy panties and a negligee so thin and see-through that it would be practically invisible when seen from afar. That left everything from her flat chest to her sunk-in navel visible, but she did not seem to care. This was not simply because she was in the girl's dorm. It had more to do with the fact that her roommate was a special person to her.

"…"

It seemed like Shirai Kuroko would continue rolling back and forth forever, but then she suddenly froze in place.

She looked over at the neighboring bed.

There was only a gap of 50 cm between beds. Another girl lay that short distance away and she was fast asleep unlike Shirai. Her shoulder-length brown hair was a bit sticky with sweat and her slender, white fingers were just barely poking out from her baggy light-blue pajamas. She must have gone through a change in her state of mind recently because she had switched out the hairpin she wore on the side of her head for a more decorative one. However, it was now lying on the side table.

This was Shirai's beloved onee-sama, Misaka Mikoto.

That amazing girl was one of Academy City's seven and one of Tokiwadai Middle School's two Level 5s, she was known as the school's ace, and she was a target of envy even within that elite school that was itself a target of envy. She was sinking into the bed while lying on her side.

"…Nheh heh heh… You lost the punishment game, so you have to do whatever I tell you…"

Her cute lips curled into an incredibly happy smile as they uttered those words in her sleep.

On her own bed, Shirai used both hands to violently rustle her hair.

(Gwahh!! I have to know! What has happened to onee-sama recently!? She has been like this ever since the Daihaseisai ended!! Who is she talking to in her dream!?)

Shirai began to pant heavily. As her name suggested Shirai Kuroko was a girl and so was Misaka Mikoto, so this was one of those complicated issues characteristic of girls.

Simply saying it would be too outright for her, so that underclassman girl preferred to attack in a more roundabout fashion.

If those words Misaka spoke in her sleep had been directed at Shirai herself, there would have been no problem. However, Shirai did not recall challenging her roommate to a punishment game in the recent past. That left the major issue of whether the words were being spoken to a boy or a girl. For Shirai, many

extremely personal feelings were riding on that.

While remaining completely unaware of those worries, Misaka Mikoto used both arms to grab and embrace the large pillow she normally rested her head on.

"…What should I make you do first….Mutter mutter…"

(Curse yoooouuuuuu!! Onee…Onee-sama, why are you rubbing your cheek against your pillow like that!? What does that fluffy pillow represent in your mind!?)

Shirai Kuroko began violently rolling back and forth on top of her bed once more, but the happy-looking girl showed no sign of waking.

The time was 5:25 AM.

Another sleep-deprived morning began.

Chapter 1: Sunny Morning Classes. *Winter_Clothes.*

Part 1

It was September 30th.

As it was the final day of September, every school in Academy City had only morning classes. This was simply because the schools switched to using winter uniforms the following day.

Academy City had been created by redeveloping the western third of Tokyo and it had around 1.8 million students living within it. This left the clothing businesses very busy for nothing more than the switch to winter uniforms.

The actual measurements and orders were carried out at around the time of the Daihaseisai, so the only thing left was for the students to pick up their new winter uniforms. Even so, the congestion was on a great enough scale to require special treatment. Having only morning classes was also customarily a means of giving the students a time to wear their winter uniforms and “break them in”.

But for students who did not have to worry about getting a new uniform, it simply meant they had a half day of school.

One such student was a boy named Kamijou Touma. He had entered a certain high school that same year, and the winter uniform he had purchased when entering the school still fit him fine. As such, he was spared having to deal with the busy stores on that day.

His position was not unique. Most of the students in his year were in similar positions. It was primarily second and third year students having to frantically rush to the stores. The first year students were almost all completely carefree.

Currently, the students were resting during the 10 minute break between third and fourth period classes.

Kamijou Touma, the average student mentioned before, opened a window in the hallway and blankly stared out at the scenery. The math lesson before had bored him half to death and he had just washed his face at the water fountain to wake himself up.

He was of average height and weight, but he had a bit of muscle tone. This was not because he was on a sports team. He had gained those muscles from fighting or fleeing within the back alleys. His pointy black hair hinted that he at least sometimes checked fashion magazines and that the fortress of his heart led him to show some care about his looks as a high school boy. But the way he looked around with sleepy eyes and opened his mouth wide to yawn repeatedly made that fortress's defenses seem rather weak.

Kamijou Touma rested his elbows on the window sill and enjoyed the coolness of the soft autumn breeze now that the last remnants of the summer heat had faded.

"Sigh… I wish I could meet someone nice," he muttered.

As soon as he said that, a straight thrust punch struck Kamijou's temples on either side as if his head was being crushed in a vice.

The impact created a tremendous noise.

To his right stood Tsuchimikado Motoharu and to his left stood Aogami Pierce.

They were both Kamijou Touma's classmates.

"Idiots, what the hell are you doing!?" shouted Kamijou as he swung his head around.

But in response Tsuchimikado only let his eyes behind his sunglasses sparkle as he said, "…Nyah. Kami-yan, when you say that, it just sounds like you're making fun of us."

"Those words will likely act as a trigger causing some strange girl to come falling out of one of the classrooms around here. Yes, it's always that way with

you, Kami-yan! I get the feeling you could win the complete set with everything from a super AI robot girl to a high class spring fairy lady!!”

As always, those two were going on about some nonsense or another, but it did not seem they had meant any real harm.

The three boys were wearing black collared jackets and black slacks. Kamijou had his jacket unbuttoned so the red T-shirt underneath was visible. Naturally, a dress shirt was meant to be worn underneath, but from the example set by Aogami Pierce and Tsuchimikado’s blond hair, necklaces, and such, it was obvious the school was not very strict about that sort of thing.

“So what are you two out here for?”

“Oh, right. Come look at this,” said Aogami Pierce.

He held out a copy of the top-selling weekly manga magazine in Japan. His friendship may have been evident in the fact that he had not used it when striking Kamijou.

Aogami Pierce flipped open the back cover of the manga magazine.

The page displayed a color advertisement for mail-order products.

“Do you see the ‘Shoulder Massage Holder-kun’ listed here?”

“Yeah?”

“Sounds good, right? Lately, my right shoulder has been hurting oddly, but when I massage it myself, my left shoulder starts hurting.”

The photo of the product was incredibly small, but it showed a U-shaped plastic device. It was probably somewhere between 15 and 20 cm long. The U-shaped portion would fit directly over the shoulders when it was used. They came in an economical set of two.

“Come to think of it, I saw an advertisement for this on those late-night mail-order TV ads.”

“So did I! If they’re advertising it so heavily, it must feel really, really good!!”

“Eh?” said Tsuchimikado sounding dubious. “That’s probably a bluff. Especially because there’s no way to quantify how good or bad something feels. You’ll probably find out it’s terrible but they’ll just insist everyone in their test group thought it felt good if you complain. Don’t you think, nyah?”

“Keh! Someone like you who gets his younger stepsister to give him a shoulder massage every day just doesn’t understand!!”

“It isn’t every day. It’s only about once every three days, nyah!!”

The way the direction and topic of conversation changed from line to line was normal for their chats, but Kamijou was confused as to what the other two wanted from him.

And then they made that quite clear.

“So, Kami-yan, what do you think? I think it’ll definitely work great.”

“No, I don’t think you’ll find any joy from that thing, nyah.”

Kamijou sighed as he realized they just needed a third opinion to break their tie.

He also wondered why those two were so hung up over this shoulder massage machine in the first place.

“Y’know, I’m hardly a specialist when it comes to shoulder massages, so I doubt anything I say will be very persuasive. Doesn’t this kind of defeat the purpose of finding the majority opinion?”

“Stop being so uselessly picky about this, moron!!”

“I am not useless!!”

It was only after reflexively shouting back that Kamijou belatedly realized that was the driving force behind Aogami Pierce and Tsuchimikado’s energy.

And continuing on with it despite that realization was simply how an argument worked.

“I doubt it would have much of an effect. You talk about having stiff shoulders,

but the area that hurts and the level of stiffness differs from person to person. Also, don't you think the effects would be different between a guy and a girl? It sounds pretty fishy to me from the moment it claims to be able to cure any and all shoulder stiffness."

"Told you, nyah. You just can't beat a stepsister when it comes to shoulder massages."

"How am I supposed to know that without trying it out myself!? And I wouldn't be having this problem in the first place if I had a girl to give me a shoulder massage!!" shouted Aogami Pierce as he began to lightly beat Tsuchimikado. Kamijou watched that unproductive conflict as an unrelated third party.

"I have an idea," he said as he tore Aogami Pierce and Tsuchimikado apart. "How about you try it out? I know someone who has constant issues with stiff shoulders and is quite fond of this kind of mail-order good."

Part 2

A girl named Fukiyose Seiri was in Kamijou Touma's class.

She had a strong sense of duty and had been their class's member of the Daihaseisai committee up to a few days before. She had black hair parted so it lay behind her ears and she had large breasts for a student. She had an atmosphere of being strict about school rules and she had already prepared her textbook and notebook for the next period despite the break not being over yet. She wore a long-sleeve sailor uniform. With the sole exception of her slightly-too-short skirt, everything from her scarf to her indoor shoes was perfectly measured for uniformity.

She just so happened to have a habit of collecting health-related mail-order goods.

She must have felt somehow embarrassed about it because she had kept that fact hidden from everyone but a certain boy.

Fukiyose Seiri was calmly chatting with Himegami Aisa, the classmate who sat in the neighboring seat, instead of frantically comparing homework with the other girl.

“Is Fukiyose here!?”

The instant the classroom door flew open and that shout entered from the exact same direction, she flinched back a bit. It was Kamijou, Aogami, and Tsuchimikado, the class’s three biggest idiots who were collectively known as the **Delta Force**. Those three had caused all sorts of trouble in the past, but Fukiyose silently swore she would keep her presence of mind no matter what happened. But then Kamijou opened his mouth and spoke.

“I beg you, Fukiyose, let us see how good those two things you have feel!!”

An odd snapping sound came from that large-breasted girl’s head.

Before the term “presence of mind” could flit through her mind, she intercepted Tsuchimikado Motoharu and Aogami Pierce with one straight punch each. Kamijou Touma’s expression stiffened in shock when he saw what happened to the other two, and then he received a powerful blow from Fukiyose’s hard forehead. As she looked down on the villains who were collapsed on the ground, the victorious Fukiyose brushed the dust off of her hands. It was at that moment that Tsukuyomi Komoe, their 135 cm tall female teacher, entered the classroom.

“Now then, class. Today’s final lesson is chemistry, so…gyahhh!? My tender class has been transformed into a lawless delinquent battleground!?”

Komoe-sensei was completely taken aback by the horrible scene before her, but Fukiyose replied with an entirely cool expression.

“It was necessary to ensure peace.”

“What in the world happened!? Fukiyose-chan is acting like a member of a peacekeeping force!!”

He must have heard Komoe-sensei on the verge of tears because Kamijou let out a groan.

While still collapsed on the ground, he said, “S-sensei… No one was in the wrong here…”

“Then how did this happen!?” lamented Komoe-sensei.

In response, Kamijou pointed a trembling finger slightly below Fukiyose Seiri’s face.

“…I know Fukiyose-san has these two things that probably feel really good, but she won’t let us see how they feel!!”

Hearing that, Komoe-sensei’s face turned beet red and she collapsed straight backwards. Without even checking on her, Fukiyose Seiri slowly approached with her fist clenched for an additional attack.

Part 3

Four girls were in a hospital.

The area they were in was not off limits, but people almost never came there because of how far away it was from the routes leading to the exits. In the hospital, it was known as the clinical research area, but warm sunbeams came in through the window despite that over-the-top name.

The girls were standing in the hallway.

All four of them had shoulder-length brown hair and skin so white it almost looked transparent. They all had the exact same silhouette and their eyes were the same in every way from the shape and color to the iris and retina. Despite the season, they all wore the Tokiwadai Middle School summer uniform: gray pleated skirt, short-sleeve white blouse, and sleeveless summer sweater.

They went by many different names.

The Sisters.

Radio Noise.

Mass-produced military models of a Level 5.

Due to the effects of growth acceleration techniques using genetic manipulation and drugs, their lifespan had been drastically reduced. They were undergoing various treatments in the hospital to overcome that, and they were going to begin the second stage of that treatment today.

They had lived in the hospital up to that point, but they would now be heading outside bit by bit for rehabilitation.

A doctor with a frog-like face spoke to those Sisters.

He was holding a small clipboard of the sort waiters used.

“Are all of you okay with wearing Tokiwadai Middle School’s winter uniform while outside?”

“That is not a problem, replies Misaka #10032,” said one of the four girls.

They could only be distinguished by serial number rather than by name. That frog-faced doctor had not decided on that. It had apparently been a decision from when they were being produced.

“Is the same size fine for all four of you?” said the doctor as he wrote their “order” on the clipboard.

In response to his question, the four Sisters did not even exchange a single glance. Their expression made it clear they felt that was a silly question.

“There is no need to even take measurements. We all match, answers Misaka #10032.”

“Every Misaka was made from the same genetic information. We are mass-produced models, adds Misaka #13577.”

“Since we were all made via the same process, there is no need to even entertain the possibility of differences, concludes Misaka #10039.”

“M-Misaka is…”

The final girl trailed off.

“…?”

“…?”

“…?”

The other three Sisters turned toward the one that had made that inarticulate comment, and Serial Number 19090 averted her gaze and shrunk down. From the way she used her hands, it seemed she was trying to hide her upper body.

#10032, the girl a certain boy referred to as Misaka Imouto, looked over with a bit of suspicion in her eyes. She then approached #19090 as if she had just realized something.

She clenched both fists with just the thumbs extended, turned those fists upside down, and stuck her thumbs into the gap between #19090’s body and skirt.

“Mh!? According to the spec sheet, we should all be exactly the same, but there is enough room for two thumbs, says Misaka #10032 in an emergency report!!”

“But every Misaka should be the same, says Misaka #13577 as she displays her shock!”

“Her waist may be different but what about the rest of her? says Misaka #10039

as she completely calmly suggests a thorough examination."

To carry out that plan, #10032 pulled her thumbs out from the skirt and moved them upwards, but #19090 used both hands to intercept them. Unlike the other models, her face was tinged a bit red and her facial expressions seemed more diverse.

With a shocked look on his face, the frog-faced doctor said, "The faces and physiques of monozygotic twins can grow distinct due to differences in diet and exercise, so maybe this is the same. It wouldn't be surprising to see variations in style between clones."

The doctor silently regretted some things he had said before.

This situation had come about because he had taught them that skinnier girls were better, and the better the girl, the more choice they had in guys. That was simply the frog-faced doctor's own prejudiced preferences, but the Sisters knew very, very few guys. For that reason, they assumed that the frog-faced doctor was a good example of an average guy and had likely come to the conclusion of "If this man thinks that, then perhaps *that high school boy* thinks so too, decides Misaka amidst her confused thoughts".

And he did not know where the knowledge had come from, but they had also learned that there was a special ring that was placed on the ring finger and that a girl had to be the best she could be to acquire it. He was not sure whether to call that information accurate or not, but it had led the Sisters to grow more and more individualistic nonetheless. (Although the Sisters themselves did not seem aware of it.)

"So this Misaka has been going behind the other Misakas' backs and cheating with a diet, says Misaka #10032 as she continues the investigation."

"#20001 aka Last Order is supposed to keep control of every Misaka. What is she doing? asks Misaka #13577 as she brings up the concepts of mission and duty."

"She is so little that she may not know what the purpose of those actions was, speculates Misaka #10039 as she keeps a level head."

While the Sisters spoke back and forth, the frog-faced doctor spoke up once

more.

“Is this really something to get that worked up over? You are all the same basic model, so can’t you achieve the same result by doing what #19090 did?”

“…!!”

“…!!”

“…!!”

Three of the Sisters turned toward the remaining one at high speed.

#19090, the Sister who had acquired a weight-loss technique before the others, slowly stepped backwards.

“Misaka will do what her danger management ability tells her and run away! says Misaka as-…!!”

Before she could finish shouting, the other girls jumped at her.

Part 4

A woman named Yoshikawa Kikyou was inside the same hospital the Sisters were rampaging around within.

She was a former member of the research group that had planned and carried out the experiment meant to create a new category called Level 6 to exist above Academy City’s current classifications of Level 0, Level 1, Level 2, Level 3, Level 4, and Level 5.

By her own admission, she had a naïve but not kind personality. She had created a total of over 20,000 clones and killed over half of those in the process of that experiment. The one doing the actual killing had been a Level 5 student who was the prime candidate for achieving Level 6, but that was no excuse.

Currently, the experiment had been not just frozen but ended after a fatal flaw was found in it.

However, that had not caused everything related to the experiment to just disappear into thin air. The girls created just to be killed and the esper who had been ordered to do nothing but kill them were still human children even if they had special characteristics or lived in a special environment. The mental pressure this brought down on them had to be unimaginable. Their individual problems were bad enough, but there was a rift of absolute depth between them and the relationship between them could only be called a catastrophe. Normally thinking, there was no way the gap between them could be bridged.

But…

“No! says Misaka as Misaka refuses you! Misaka isn’t getting down! Misaka is never getting down! This bag is Misaka’s territory! says Misaka as Misaka strongly objects while sitting on top of the bag you are holding!!”

“Why you…!! Don’t swing around on the bag someone’s carrying over their shoulder, you little shit!! Did you forget that I’m still recovering!?”

(The victims in question are as lively as ever.)

Accelerator, the one who had done the killing, was standing on wobbling legs with a tonfa-like modern cane in his right hand and a sports bag strapped over his left shoulder. His colorless white hair and red eyes were his most notable characteristics and he now wore primarily gray clothes.

Last Order, one of the ones to be killed, was sitting seiza-style on top of Accelerator’s sports bag with one hand on either side of the shoulder strap like it was a swing. She could only pull this off because she looked like a child of about 10, but she may still have been too much for someone who needed a cane. She had shoulder-length brown hair and brown eyes. She wore a light blue camisole with an unbuttoned men’s dress shirt worn over it.

Accelerator had been hospitalized after being shot in the forehead on August 31st, but he was finally being released after spending a month there. Technically, his body had not been healed, but he had undergone all the treatment available. The after-effects of the damage the fragments of his shattered skull had done to his brain were not gone and he still had to wear a choker-style electrode around

his neck to supplement a portion of his brain's functions. Without that, he could not even speak or stand on his own two feet. But after the injury he had undergone, it was a miracle he was able to go back to his normal life at all.

And that was why those three currently stood at the main entrance of the hospital.

Yoshikawa too had been shot at the end of the previous month and the bullet had grazed her heart, so she was not exactly in the best condition to watch after those children, but she had taken on the duty nonetheless.

It was not that she had no choice but to do it.

She wanted to do it.

"Okay, listen up. This is the entrance, so stop playing around so you don't trouble the other people here. You can play once we drop off this luggage and calm down a bit."

"Misaka wasn't playing! says Misaka as Misaka forces her center of gravity further and further down and objects with a serious expression!!"

"If that sense of leisure oozing off of you isn't playing, then what the hell do you call it!?" shouted Accelerator while the sports bag still threatened to flatten him. Yoshikawa ignored that exchange and headed out from the entrance and lightly waved at the driver of the taxi waiting for them. He drove up to them with practiced motions.

Accelerator held out the bag Last Order was sitting on toward the driver and said, "I'll just throw all this in the trunk, so hurry up and open it."

"You're treating Misaka like luggage!? says Misaka as Misaka flees to the back seat while trembling!!"

Accelerator tossed the sports bag into the back seat so it squashed Last Order underneath and sat in an open seat.

There was still room in the back seat, but Yoshikawa headed around to the passenger seat so she did not have to deal with the commotion in the back.

Just to be sure, she said to the driver, “They’re just feeling a bit giddy after being in the hospital for so long.”

“Ah ha ha. It’s a good thing for kids to have that much energy.”

“Oh, and the small one isn’t used to cars so she might vomit.”

“!?”

The driver’s body twitched at that. Yoshikawa guessed he was new at the job. She could hear the sounds of a struggle as Accelerator grabbed his sports bag and moved as far away from Last Order as he could get. Yoshikawa’s warning had only been a bluff meant to make sure the driver gave them a smoother ride, but it seemed it was not as well known a trick as she had thought.

The taxi set off as smoothly as if it was delivering raw eggs.

Yoshikawa informed the driver of their destination and checked the digital clock above the meter. It was just before noon.

Since he had believed the announcement about Last Order vomiting, Accelerator grabbed her face and shoved her away when she tried to approach. As he did so, he looked at the back of Yoshikawa’s head with a puzzled look.

“Where are we headed?”

“To the school someone I know works at. I have arranged for us to meet there. You’re planning to quit your current school, right? I’m sure you know what that means.”

Most of the students in Academy City lived in dormitories. There were some who did things like freeload at a city bakery, but those were very rare cases.

Leaving a school (technically they were psychic power development institutions that included schools) meant losing your place to live in that school’s dorms. Accelerator was constantly targeted by Academy City’s delinquents and they would also trash his dorm room, so he had no problem ditching that residence. Every single piece of furniture had been destroyed, so there was no value in the place. However, losing his only real place of shelter was still a big deal.

The reason Accelerator had chosen to leave that school despite that risk was…

“I don’t want to have anything to do with that Level 6 shit ever again.”

The organization that had directly carried out that experiment had been destroyed, but the disappearance of the research institution that used the Sisters did not fully free them from its curse. It was on a different scope, but his school had a special classroom. He was the only student in the class and it essentially functioned as a square cage to isolate him as an experimental animal.

If he truly wanted to leave that bloody world, he had to throw away all of that. The lab, the school, the dorm…everything.

From now on, he would have to choose a school that did not have such powerful intent behind it. He had no idea if there really were any researchers who would not leap at the chance to experiment on a test subject as desirable as Accelerator, but he would do his best to find one.

Accelerator and Last Order were such special beings that they would never find a place to live outside of Academy City.

And if he stayed in Academy City but did not attend a school, his only choice was to live in the back alleys as a member of Skill-Out. If Academy City’s strongest Level 5 chose that path, it would only lead to complete destruction.

Accelerator grimaced.

“So did the board of directors decide to leave us under your control? I suppose this is perfectly suited to your field of research.”

As a research member involved in the experiment, Yoshikawa had once helped produce Last Order and the other clones and had helped with the maintenance of Accelerator.

Even after the research related to Level 6 had been stopped, he was still Academy City’s strongest Level 5 and excellent research material. If Yoshikawa could research him and find some new way to use him for psychic power development, he would be very valuable indeed.

Accelerator sensed the influence and planning of someone from behind the

scenes.

Most of the people Accelerator had ever met could be summed up with the term “monster”. As long as it allowed him to escape the curse of that sort of adult, he decided it might be easier to leave the decision to Yoshikawa. Of course, if he ever disagreed with her methods, he would just crush her and try elsewhere.

But…

“No,” replied Yoshikawa Kikyou without even turning around.

“What?”

“I am not your next supervisor. Think about this rationally. With my research job gone, I am essentially unemployed. Also, after the experiment itself and August 31st, I have been involved with an incident related to you twice now. If the board of directors still decided to assign me as your guardian, they should all be fired.”

“…Then what? Are you only here to run an errand for the strange new researcher that we’re being handed over to?”

“You certainly are deeply suspicious. But given the environment you’ve grown up in, I suppose that shouldn’t come as a surprise. However, that view is incorrect in two different ways. First, I am planning to hand you over to someone you know. Second, this person is not a researcher.”

“…”

Accelerator narrowed his eyes as he carefully thought through what Yoshikawa had said.

He did not trust her.

He did not like having that kid next to him, but he was willing to crush any enemy even with that handicap. It would be faster to thoroughly crush an enemy that showed itself here than to spend a long time constantly being on guard for some unknown attacker.

(…This is getting boring.)

And then the perfectly innocent girl known as Last Order gave a carefree remark.

“The only person I know who isn’t a researcher is Yomikawa, says Misaka as Misaka raises her hand to give her answer.”

“That’s right,” replied Yoshikawa happily.

Yomikawa was a woman who worked as a member of Academy City’s Anti-Skill and was one of Yoshikawa Kikyou’s few friends in the public world. Accelerator and Last Order knew her as the track-suit-wearing woman who had looked after the two of them in the hospital while Yoshikawa was still incapacitated from her gunshot wound.

Accelerator clicked his tongue as that possibility had not come to mind until Last Order mentioned it.

Hearing that, Yoshikawa said, “Oh? I thought maybe you would relax a bit when you heard the answer.”

“Then how about you give me some more *thorough* answers?”

“Well, you will see whether I am lying or not when we arrive. It may be best if you actually don’t fix your bad habit of being cautious about the naïve words of others. Especially since you know the value of what you must protect.”

Yoshikawa was not giving in at all. Accelerator looked out the car window in annoyance as a means of averting his gaze from the passenger seat. Last Order alone seemed oblivious to the exchange and said, “Eh? So it isn’t Yomikawa? says Misaka as Misaka starts tugging on your shoulder.”

Part 5

At noon, school was let out for the day.

Kamijou was not a part of any clubs or teams, so he just had to head back to his dorm.

He put his leather shoes on at the shoe lockers and continued on off of the school grounds.

“What did I do wrong?” he muttered.

He was of course thinking about the series of events with the massager and Fukiyose Seiri’s headbutt.

(Hmm. Did I word it too familiarly? But even when I said please and called her “Fukiyose-sama”, she still hit me. And even when I started with “Dear Madam, the colors of fall certainly have deepened”, she still headbutted me across the room. I wonder what had her so upset.)

That boy had grown used to the misfortune that was always pouring down on him, so he was resilient when it came to direct blows. That was why he did not have any bandages despite the beating he had taken. Kamijou Touma had worked up incredible endurance from having his head constantly bitten by a starving girl.

And without ever realizing the fundamental issue despite the deep thought he gave it, he finally decided he should have worked in the seasonal words more casually. All the while, Kamijou continue to walk through the standard cityscape of Academy City.

By September 30th, the final traces of heat had been swept away. The gentle breeze turning the blades of the wind turbines showed that he would no longer need to use his air conditioner. The weather forecast displayed on the large screen on the department store wall had switched from saying “watch out for heatstroke” to “the season is changing, so keep a careful eye on your health”.

And then…

“There! There! There you are! I finally goddamn found you!!”

A girl’s voice shouted that comment that proved the breakdown of the modern Japanese language that linguistic critics often warned of.

Kamijou turned around and saw (what should have been) a lovely girl of the prestigious rich girl's school, Tokiwadai Middle School, charging toward him at high speed.

It was Misaka Mikoto.

She had shoulder-length brown hair and was about 7 cm shorter than Kamijou. Instead of the summer uniform he was used to seeing her in, she wore a beige blazer and a dark blue checkered pleated skirt. She had to have received that winter uniform brand new only that day or the day before, but the skirt had already been shortened. As befitting a student at a rich girl's school, she held what looked like a violin case in addition to her thin school bag.

Whenever Kamijou saw her face, an annoyed look appeared on his own face.

"Well, this is…ugh…such misfortune."

"Don't react like that every time you see me!! Gyahh!" shouted Mikoto.

Kamijou had received punches and headbutts from Fukiyose Seiri that morning, but he felt more misfortune about this encounter. That may have only been natural since that girl was known as the Railgun and she had a habit of sending lightning spears and other such things his way.

Kamijou readjusted his grip on his thin school bag as if it was quite heavy.

"So do you need something with me? Keep it short. And let's keep walking if possible. I'd like to get home."

"Was that first comment not enough to piss me off, so you had to go one step further?" Mikoto tilted her head to the side with her lips twisted up in an evil grin. "Actually, do you even have the right to treat me so horribly?"

"What are you talking about?"

Kamijou sensed some kind of evil intent behind Mikoto's flat words, so he slowly distanced himself from her.

Then, that Ace of Tokiwadai Middle School who was supposed to have the impeccable conduct of a high class lady folded her arms and said, "The

punishment game♪”

Kamijou Touma’s eyebrows twitched.

The punishment game in question had been a bet made between Kamijou and Mikoto during the Daihaseisai, Academy City’s large scale sports festival that began on September 19th and lasted 7 days. Simply put, the one whose school ranked lower had to do whatever the other said.

In a city of psychic power development, the use of esper powers was allowed during the sports festival. And Tokiwadai Middle School’s students could use things like lightning spears reaching hundreds of millions of volts and wall-like blasts of wind that reached 80 m/s to blow away the students of their opposing school like some kind of natural disaster.

Kamijou was in high school while Mikoto was in middle school, but that age difference was not enough to make up for that natural-disaster-level threat. Everyone in his class had been horribly thrashed during their direct confrontation on the third day. Also, several members of Kamijou’s class such as Tsuchimikado, Himegami, Fukiyose, and himself had been injured during the trouble on the first day of the Daihaseisai. All those various circumstances had led to his defeat. His school’s overall ranking had been terrible and they had certainly had no chance against a prestigious school like Tokiwadai in that state.

But a loss was a loss.

That meant Misaka Mikoto was completely in the right to bring up the punishment game. But…

“Huh? That thing’s still valid?”

“Don’t one-sidedly let something like that go!! I really am going to get you to do whatever I ask! Hah! You should thank me for keeping things as they were rather than adding on interest!!”

Mikoto puffed out her chest in triumphant pride.

Some of the students passing by looked over curiously.

Her excessive reaction seemed to be an explosion of resentment over the fact

that she had wanted to do this earlier but had not been able to thanks to Kamijou's time in the hospital and in Italy. Kamijou started to voice a complaint about the idea of adding interest, but he took the mature route and held his tongue.

Instead, he sighed and said, "That's fine I guess, but there really isn't much I can do."

"Hmm, so you're trying to talk your way out of this like that, are you?"

"No, that wasn't my intention."

"I suppose you're right. Someone as mediocre as you really can't do very much, can you? But don't worry. While you may not be, I am wonderful enough to have already taken that into consideration. I intend to ask you to do things even an idiot can do, so make sure to work hard with your full mediocre ability."

"…"

An odd snapping noise came from Kamijou's temple.

Getting angry would lead to nothing good in a situation like this, but Kamijou Touma was not a wise enough student to think rationally by that point.

"Fine then," replied Kamijou with his head hanging down.

For some reason, Mikoto breathed a sigh of relief when she heard Kamijou's casual response.

But…

His head then shot up to stare Mikoto directly in the eye and he gathered up all his strength to shout.

"Fine!! Go ahead and command your beloved slave, Kamijou Touma, to do whatever you want!!"

The crowd around them suddenly froze in place.

They looked back and forth between Kamijou and Mikoto, and then started

whispering amongst themselves. After a pause of a few seconds, the crowd of people moved away from the two of them like a wave.

“What…? Wait…slave…ehh!? What are you saying!?”

Even though he saw the color withdraw from Mikoto’s face as quickly as the crowd from them, Kamijou was not the type of person to go easy on her and stop there.

Kamijou reverently knelt on the ground, pulled a thin desk mat out from his thin school bag, and began fanning her with a completely serious expression void of any mocking whatsoever.

“Ensuring a comfortable environment for you naturally goes without saying, milady. I may be unused to this sort of task, but I will do my very best. I beg your forgiveness for any mistakes.”

“Wait, you idiot!! You’re going way overboard here! And don’t fan my skirt up from below!!” shouted Mikoto as her pale face quickly grew tinged with red and she used both hands to hold down her already short skirt. She was wearing shorts underneath, but it was more about how it felt.

And then…

“Onee-samaaa!!”

A pigtailed girl in a blazer named Shirai Kuroko forcefully charged toward them, breaking through the crowd that had drawn away in shock.

“Wh-what is this…!?”

Normally, she would probably have either embraced Mikoto or grabbed both of her hands, but for once her upper body was knocked backwards as if she had run into an invisible wall between herself and Mikoto. The grand scene before her seemed to have come as quite a shock.

“K-Kuroko?”

While (it looked like) Mikoto publicly had an older boy fanning her while he prostrated himself at her feet, she turned her head toward her underclassman

with her expression frozen in place.

But it seemed Shirai Kuroko could not hear her beloved onee-sama's voice because she merely stood in place trembling.

Her gaze was fixated on Kamijou Touma who (it looked like) had become Mikoto's loyal servant.

Shirai said, "Wh-what a gallant and straightforward display of subordination… But that is supposed to be my role!!"

Shirai's eyes contained envy, jealousy, and a hint of respect.

"Stop that, you idiots!! Don't you both bow down to me like that! Is this some kind of ritual!? You're making me look like the leader of some cult!!" shouted Misaka Mikoto, but Kamijou Touma merely continued to earnestly fan her from below while Shirai Kuroko could not stop trembling with fear at how formidable a rival he was.

Part 6

Tsukuyomi Komoe let out an exhausted sigh in the staff room.

That level of fatigue did not suit her 135 cm height and 12 year old appearance, but it was well deserved. Not only had she been forced to deal with the violence between her students that morning (while it might not stand out much around Kamijou Touma, that was quite a bit of trouble for a normal school life), but she had another reason as well.

This other reason was scattered atop her steel desk.

The cheaply printed papers had Future Career Survey printed at the top. During the first year, this was a very general survey that simply asked what kind of job the student would like to work in the future. Whether the student would continue his or her education or get a job, what school and what department the student

would choose if continuing with their education, or what company would they aim for and what methods would they use to get hired if heading straight out to get a job were all questions for further down the line.

But…

“Sigh…”

Komoe-sensei held her head in her hands.

Tsuchimikado Motoharu had been as serious as he possibly could when he wrote “I want to go to the maid kingdom. There, I will start a coup d’etat, and as the mastermind, I will make an unhappy maid into my empress.” Aogami Pierce had written “I want to be popular” in such big letters it did not fit within the answer box. Kamijou Touma had written “As long as I can be happy, I don’t care what I do” as an earnest desire that threatened to bring tears to her eyes.

(Someone important said more and more of the modern youth lack a desire for a specific job, but I get the feeling this isn’t quite what he meant…)

In all likelihood, those three boys had not simply written some arbitrary answer with their mechanical pencils because they had no interest in the survey. They had likely been completely serious in those answers. And that was the real problem.

At that point, a female teacher in a track suit named Yomikawa Aiho approached.

“Hey, there. Would you prefer a smoke or a drink for a change of pace?”

“Alcohol is not permitted on the job…”

Normally, Tsukuyomi Komoe would have replied very loudly and begun a lecture on what it meant to be a teacher, but her weariness from the day left her with only that weak response.

Yomikawa glanced across Komoe-sensei’s desk.

“Then I guess that leaves a smoke.”

Komoe-sensei pulled a cigarette out of the box Yomikawa held out and stuck it in her mouth.

“Huh? This has a high quality taste to it.”

“Well, I did get these at that smoking bar that opened recently. They’re 70 yen a piece.”

With no smoking areas expanding in recent times, shops specifically made to smoke in had begun to appear. Bars with a variety of tobacco products from around the world instead of cocktails had become fairly common. This example was 70 yen per cigarette, but they also had cigars from South America that were 3000 yen each.

Usually, the entirety of a school was a no smoking area, but Academy City actually often allowed smoking inside the schools. This was because the teachers often also worked as researchers in various fields, so the board of directors decided it was in the best interest of Academy City as a whole to ensure those teachers could remain focused.

And so teachers who had requested for permission to smoke were provided with small high-efficiency air purifiers. Komoe-sensei opened the drawer of her steel desk and pulled out four machines about the size of 2 cigarette packs. She placed them on the four corners of the desk.

Each of them would suck in air from only one direction. With four of them in use, they moved the air above the desk in a circle like it was being spun by a washing machine. The flow of air was not even strong enough to move a single scrap of thin paper, but it was enough to catch the cigarette smoke, suck it in, pass it through a filter, and then release the purified air. This latest model used the principles of aerodynamics to their fullest and also kept the cost low enough that they could be provided to teachers at no cost. It was an excellent item for use in everyday life.

“There we go.”

Komoe-sensei switched on the air purifiers sitting on the corners of her desk.

Yomikawa Aiho, the green track suit wearing teacher with unbelievably huge breasts, put a cigarette in her own mouth and lit it with the small lighter sitting

on Komoe-sensei's desk.

"Apparently, these are rare Belgian ones…Ugh. This was a failure. I can't pick up any subtle flavor."

"Yomikawa-sensei, that is because your taste had been dulled by just smoking through them quickly rather than savoring the flavor of each individual one."

"I don't want to hear that from **White Smoker** Tsukuyomi-sensei who easily smokes 5 times as much as I do."

The two women blew smoke out at the desk.

When the white smoke hit the top of the desk, it scattered in every direction, but it seemed to hit an invisible barrier when it reached the edges of the desk. It stopped moving and then started spiraling around until it was sucked into the desk's four corners.

The air purifiers only had any effect directly above the desk. Komoe-sensei was fine in her chair, but Yomikawa had to lean forward a bit to bring her head close enough. It seemed the system still had some room for improvement.

"It seems they're going to raise the price of tobacco products again. I can't believe it."

"It's still better than the prices for sweets and manga."

Eighty percent of Academy City's population was made up of students. Even with the exceptions of the college students, surprisingly few people in the city were allowed to smoke or drink. This meant taxes on those things did not do much to increase the budget. For that reason, it was generally understood within Academy City that taxes would be placed on the things kids liked.

The city was primarily a place for learning, so the general opinion was that it was only natural to tax the items and indulgences that were not needed for that purpose. In exchange, rent for the standard dormitories and costs for school lunches (some of those were "prototypes" made by Academy City) were incredibly low, so it all evened out in the end. That said, there were still some schools that tried to make money off of the school buses and textbooks.

“But the students’ living expenses mostly come from scholarships and subsidiary aid. It really seems like a roundabout method to me,” commented Yomikawa.

“If they directly lowered the amount the scholarships pay, they would be flooded with complaints. It’s the same way people react completely differently to a raise in the taxes on cigarettes and a cut in pay even if the amounts add up to the same.”

“Is that so?”

Yomikawa pulled a portable ashtray from a pocket on her track suit and tapped the ash off of the end of the cigarette.

She then noticed something.

Komoe-sensei’s cigarette was slowly bobbing up and down in the corner of her mouth.

She had never done that before.

“Ha ha. Were you influenced by that smoking priest you mentioned, Tsukuyomi-sensei?”

Komoe-sensei’s shoulders jumped.

She frantically moved the cigarette from the corner of her mouth to the center.

“N-no! C’mon, Yomikawa-sensei, what are you talking about!? The idea of his habits infecting me is just preposterous!!”

“If you say so.”

Komoe-sensei had brought up all of her defenses, so Yomikawa readily backed down. Komoe-sensei felt she had evaded the issue, but the look on her face told the truth.

“Mghh…”

Komoe-sensei remained on her guard, but Yomikawa just blew out some more smoke and said, “Now then, it’s about time I get going.”

“Oh, are the kids you mentioned about to arrive?”

“That’s right. They’re in a pretty bad situation, but I like dealing with an idiot or two. If my class was filled with nothing but straight-A students, things would be too boring.”

“Wait, wait! Our cigarettes are still plenty long, so let’s keep smoking for a bit longer!”

Komoe-sensei grabbed Yomikawa’s hand since the staff room was the only area they were allowed to smoke in.

A few minutes later, Komoe-sensei had smoked her cigarette right down to the filter and she left the staff room along with the track suit wearing PE teacher.

Part 7

Accelerator could hear the sound of a taxi driving away behind him.

He did not turn around to look at it.

Last Order was saying something next to him, but he did not look in her direction either.

His eyes were fixated on the mysterious sight before him.

He was near the main gate to a certain high school. He could see a reinforced concrete school building that, as far as he could tell from that distance, seemed completely normal and average with nothing unusual about it.

But that was not the issue at hand.

Accelerator was not looking at the school building.

He was looking at the two women standing before him who worked as teachers at that school.

He recognized one of them.

She had long hair tied back and wore a green track suit. Her name was Yomikawa Aiho and she also worked in Academy City's Anti-Skill. She did not like aiming a weapon at children, so that crazy PE teacher was known to take on anyone up to a Level 3 with nothing but a shield.

But she was not the issue at hand either.

Accelerator was staring at the other woman.

"I-is something the matter…?"

The woman had said she was named Tsukuyomi Komoe…but she might have been even smaller than Last Order who had once more started sitting seiza-style on Accelerator's sports bag.

Accelerator thought for a bit, gave one more glance at the short woman, and asked, "What kind of unexplainable creature is this? Where the hell did she come from?"

"No, that's not it at all. I came to Academy City after graduating from college like normal."

Accelerator narrowed his eyes at that comment that only confused the situation further.

And then…

"So they've completed research into stopping cellular aging, hm? Fucking hell, is this one of those 250 year methods I heard whispered about during the experiment? I thought I knew how deep all this went, but how much further does Academy City's technology go!?"

"U-um…You are mistaken."

"The research might be incomplete and she was captured as a living sample to analyze, says Misaka as Misaka puts on a fairly serious expression. …Poor thing. She must have so many experiments done on her she has no free time, says Misaka as Misaka readies a handkerchief in hand."

“Um! Why did this have to take such a serious turn from nothing but my introduction!? Yomikawa-sensei, stop laughing and do something!!”

As the mini-teacher grew flustered, the track suit woman laughed so hard she had to hold her sides. Yoshikawa Kikyou, the one who had brought Accelerator and Last Order there, did not seem to have expected Yomikawa to bring that companion. She smiled, but it was a slightly dangerous-looking smile representing her researcher’s spirit flaming to life once more.

As she continued to laugh, Yomikawa looked over toward Accelerator and said, “Anyway, I will be looking after you two from now on. I have some extra rooms, so feel free to just stay as freeloaders.”

“…This will only be for the time being,” said Accelerator in a disinterested tone.

“H-has the misunderstanding been resolved?” asked Komoe-sensei, but Yomikawa only repeatedly slapped her on the top of the head and laughed.

“Are you sure you want me there?” said Accelerator in a completely normal tone. “You know what circumstances I’m coming from, right? If you only think this will only lead to getting a Molotov cocktail thrown at the place in the dead of night, you’re underestimating this. Sheltering me is the same as taking on the entire goddamn dark side of Academy City.”

“That’s exactly why I’m taking you in.” Yomikawa also spoke like this was a completely normal conversation. “Have you forgotten what my job is? It’s easier to deal with that kind of thing as a member of Anti-Skill. Plus, I doubt there are many people who are going to straight-out attack an Anti-Skill member’s home. This city’s darkness operates in the areas we can’t see. If they actually declared war on us, who knows which side would crush the other.”

“…”

Accelerator fell silent as he contemplated what Yomikawa had said. Meanwhile Komoe-sensei looked around and said, “Huh? When did the atmosphere grow so heavy?”

“Well, don’t come crying to me if you get killed,” he finally said.

“You don’t have to worry about that.”

“They might add your name to their list.”

“It’s my job to rehabilitate those delinquent groups. If I let myself be scared by the kids I’m supposed to be helping, I can’t even take the first step.”

Accelerator clicked his tongue.

First it was Last Order and now this woman. That kind of idiot kept popping up around him. He felt all alone and completely out of place standing there.

While Accelerator reflected on those bitter thoughts, Yomikawa gave a smile that did not belong on an adult woman’s face.

“I’m relieved. It looks like you’ll be a lot easier to save than I had heard.”

“Are you fucking serious?”

She was talking about whether she could rehabilitate him or not.

She had no way of knowing, but Accelerator had already killed over 10,000 human beings with his own hands. With that fact in mind, it was obvious why Yomikawa’s words seemed so out of touch with reality to Accelerator.

But…

Unaware of that, Yomikawa Aiho continued speaking.

“I am. Whatever you might say, when you heard you were going to live with me, you started going through a checklist to get rid of all the possible blind spots. You wanted to close up even the smallest hole to prevent a real attack. That means you have a real intention of protecting us, right?”

“…”

Accelerator wrinkled his brow.

“That’s why I can’t stand you idiots who don’t even check over the situation properly,” he muttered under his breath.

Part 8

Kamijou parted ways with Misaka Mikoto.

This was simply because he was hungry, he wanted to change out of his sweaty school uniform, and he had a massive amount of extra soumen he needed to use up back at his dorm.

Kamijou had no idea when dried soumen went bad, but he had a feeling it would be best not to keep this year's soumen around into the next year.

Mikoto had yelled "What!? It's just soumen!", but Kamijou had gotten her to let him go by forcefully yelling back "Then do you want to be stuck eating soumen for three meals a day and having to spend all day coming up with new ways to use it for salad, pasta, udon, and anything else you can come up with!? If so, I can send you a giant cardboard box full of soumen!!"

Since he did not have much time until they had agreed to meet back up, Kamijou ran at a reckless speed back to his dorm.

"Dammit. If only I had sensed the trap back when this soumen was so cheap at that supermarket sale. This must be why no one was touching it despite the excellent price."

And in a case of horrible timing, right after he had bought all that soumen, his parents who lived outside of Academy City had sent him a massive amount of dried noodles with a note saying "We won this in a lottery. Touma, you like soumen, right?" When things like that happened every day, it could only be described as misfortune.

When he arrived at the dorm building, Tsuchimikado Maika happened to be heading out. It was a boy's dorm, but the public morals had been in great disarray lately with that maid apprentice girl coming to clean her stepbrother's room like a girlfriend and a starving girl lazing around in Kamijou's room.

The girl named Maika usually sat seiza-style on top of an autonomous drum-shaped cleaning robot, but she was walking normally today.

Her bangs were pushed up by the frilly headband characteristic of maids, so her forehead was completely visible. She wore a dark bluish long-sleeved maid uniform, but it was apparently actually the designated (winter) uniform for her school.

She attended a maid school.

When Kamijou saw Maika walking along with short strides, he asked, “Oh? What happened to your usual cleaning robot?”

“Heh heh. I’m in too good a mood to stick with that thing’s slow speed.”

This girl’s expressions were usually as hard to read as Himegami Aisa’s, but today her face was plainly beaming with joy. Kamijou looked puzzled as he tried to figure out what could have caused that, and Maika placed the back of her right hand on her left cheek and let out a domineering laugh that did not suit a maid.

“Oh ho ho! It’s these. These cuffs turned out perfectly.”

“Cuffs?”

“The end of the sleeves here,” said Maika while grinning. “A maid is supposed to be inconspicuous, so we cannot use too flashy of accessories for our hair or wherever. That is why we show our individuality in small places like our cuffs and collars.”

“Oh, I see,” said Kamijou as he looked more closely around Maika’s hands.

The cloth of the sleeves was folded back at the wrist. Kamijou was unsure what about it was different from normal, but he guessed this was similar to a girl’s joy after shortening the length of the skirt to her first uniform.

With an entranced look, Maika rubbed her sleeve against her own soft-looking cheek.

“Ahh… This term’s Gauntlets were a tremendous success. I’m in suuuuuch a good mood, I’m willing to listen to any troubles you might be having.”

“Really? Then do you know how to use up a bunch of extra soumen?”

“If you cook the soumen, chop it into small pieces, and mix it into the contents of a spring roll, it doesn’t change the flavor much at all. It’s a light way to increase their volume.”

After answering, Maika trotted off somewhere. Rays of joy could be seen coming from even her retreating back.

Kamijou looked off in that direction for a bit.

“…I guess that’s just throwing it in with something with a strong flavor to hide its own flavor.”

With that casually muttered comment on Maika’s answer, he headed into the student dorm since he had no reason to stay outside.

After riding the worn-out elevator up the 7th floor, he just had to head straight down the row of doors to reach his own room.

When he unlocked the door and entered, he found the starving girl called Index collapsed face up in the middle of the floor. He guessed she was hungry as always.

Kamijou tossed his thin bag on the floor and said, “It’s soumen again today.”

“No!!” The silver-haired girl in the pure white nun’s habit forcefully sat up with dissatisfaction filling her sparkling green eyes. “Touma, why have you been making nothing but Japanese noodles lately!? What kind of ritual is this!? Is it some kind of bodily regulation magic using culinary culture!?”

Index was complaining now, but it was no big deal since she would happily eat the soumen once it was laid out on the table. She was simply getting tired of soumen. And you could only get tired of a food that you fundamentally liked since you tended not to eat something you did not like enough to get tired of it.

Kamijou nodded and said, “Romance is tough.”

“Touma?”

Index looked at him like he was some suspicious person, but Kamijou did not care.

Incidentally, the room had another freeloader besides the girl. The calico cat was bathing in the sun on the balcony. Not long before, it had usually chosen to curl up in an area it could feel a breeze in, but it must have been changing its habits as the season changed. The cat did not have to deal with the soumen, so it managed to remain completely carefree. It had recently started growing its winter coat, so there was cat fur everywhere. And Kamijou had a feeling the cat was growing larger bit by bit.

Kamijou reached for some clothes to change into using the dorm's bathroom and said, "Maika passed on a secret technique to me, so how about we try it out? It's time for some soumen spring rolls!"

"Then can't we just have normal spring rolls!?"

Just as Index let out that cry, the intercom suddenly rang.

"Who could that be?"

Kamijou opened the door and found Tsuchimikado Motoharu standing there.

"Oh, you're here, you're here, nyah. Kami-yan, could you help me out a bit, nyah?"

Those words made Kamijou wary.

"H-help with what? Don't tell me you want me to go sink another international magic fleet."

"Kami-yan, you can already say that kind of thing with a straight face? …Maybe I should feel a bit sorry for you." Tsuchimikado gave Kamijou a sympathetic look. "It isn't that. Maika made too much food, nyah. She just left an entire pot full of stew that had been cooking for 10 hours, and there's no way I can eat it all. But it would be a waste to throw it out, so if you like you can-…"

"…I'll eat it!!"

It was Index that shouted out, not Kamijou. She also shot out from behind the boy who actually owned the room and quickly approached Tsuchimikado. Tsuchimikado also must have smelled like the food in question because the calico cat stopped lazing around and trotted over towards him.

Kamijou wanted to make a complaint, but he decided to hold his tongue when he saw how unusually excited Index was. The words “wise decision” floated up in the back of his mind.

And so the group headed next door to Tsuchimikado’s room.

Naturally, the overall layout was exactly the same as Kamijou’s room. However, the kind of training equipment you would see in a gym was lying about, so it gave quite a different impression. One wall had two bookshelves on it with one of the two transformed into a collector’s field by being filled with manga and the like that featured maids, but Kamijou decided it was the duty of a friend to let that go without comment.

“Here it is,” said Tsuchimikado as he pointed at the table.

Maika must have only just brought it because the kind of silver stock pot used by cooks was sitting on the table. Naturally, a normal dorm did not have a trivet that could fit such a giant pot, so old newspaper had been laid out on the table.

Tsuchimikado approached the pot and opened the lid. An orange stew could be seen within.

“She said the base of the stew is carrots, but they’ve been cooked so much they completely fell apart, nyah. She then threw in other vegetables and stuff, so it’s quite a stew.”

“Aren’t carrots actually pretty sweet?”

From what Kamijou could smell, that seemed to be the case. It may have been a method of letting the natural flavors of the vegetables sweeten it without using much, if any, sugar.

They scooped the stew onto large shallow plates with a ladle. The potatoes and pork had been cut up into large pieces. It had quite a number of different vegetables in it, so it seemed like it would be as nutritious as a health drink. Incidentally, it had onions in it, so they could not give any to the cat. Kamijou could not look the small animal in the eye as it rolled around and as if to say “Oh, c’mon! I want some too! I want some too! I want some too!!”

And so they began to eat.

It was an unexpectedly wonderful meal, but Kamijou was still worried about what he would do with all that soumen.

“Time to eat,” Kamijou said with spoon in hand before looking over at Tsuchimikado. “You sure are generous. Maika may say she’s an apprentice, but her cooking is on par with your average restaurant, don’t you think?”

“Nyah. That’s the whole reason I did this. I didn’t want to waste something so valuable just because I couldn’t eat it all myself. And I definitely can’t eat this much on my own, nyah.”

“I guess. But couldn’t you save it for later?”

Tsuchimikado froze in place.

He usually ate out or had his younger stepsister cook for him, so he did not do much cooking for someone living on his own. That must have been why the possibility never occurred to him.

Kamijou Touma, the home cooking boy, clarified further.

“Also, if Maika made this much for you, doesn’t that mean she probably isn’t coming to your room for a while? She probably made something this nutritious you could reheat as needed so you wouldn’t starve.”

The cat began swatting something like a box with its front paws.

They looked down and saw a sealed container for leftover food. It was very, very large.

“…”

“…”

“…”

Kamijou Touma, Index, and Tsuchimikado Motoharu all exchanged glances.

Given Tsuchimikado Maika’s great kindness and Tsuchimikado Motoharu’s hopelessness, they could all guess just how much danger loomed in that

sunglasses boy’s future if that stew was taken from him.

The silence continued for a few seconds.

The cat let out a meow.

Using that as their sign, Kamijou and Index almost simultaneously began vigorously devouring their stew.

Tsuchimikado’s face had gone completely pale.

“Wait! Kami-yan, stop, stop!! I was mistaken! I can’t give you any of that! Listen to me! My stepsister’s cooking is mine and mine alone!!”

“Hah hah! Sorry, but I’m not about to wait!! And you should probably be more concerned about stopping Index!! She’s about to go back for seconds!!”

“Nyahh!?” shouted Tsuchimikado, but Index could not be stopped. Her spoon moved so fast it looked like she was going to devour the entire contents of the pot.

In its own way, this was another peaceful day.

Between the Lines 1

London’s Lambeth Palace had always functioned as the official residence for the Anglican Church’s Archbishop. The grounds were currently opened for sightseeing, but the inside of the building was still off limits to normal people and all information on it was off limits as well.

Simply put, no one knew what it was like inside.

The most one could do was imagine what might be inside from the historic look of the exterior. The area was wrapped in mystery and fascination, and any member of the Anglican Church that cared about social status and influence set it as their goal. Without exaggerating, it could be called a throne.

The building had nothing to do with your average person and yet no one found its absolute privacy suspicious. It also had a greater magical defense network surrounding it than even Buckingham Palace where the queen lived. Everyone from the guards to the gardeners and the cleaners were well-versed in anti-intruder close combat magic. The layout of the pillars, the patterns on the wallpaper, and even the amount of light put off by the Western lamps all held magical meaning that functioned as *a single trap.* The building itself was a single giant device, so an intruder could not simply avoid the traps. Everything related to the building was designed with the intent of making such a ridiculous concept a reality. Due to the specific clergyman who lived there and the idea of the iron maiden, it was sometimes sarcastically referred to as the **Nail Bedroom**.

Lambeth Palace was currently wrapped in the silence of the night.

There was a time difference of approximately 9 hours between Japan and England.

Much fewer personnel were there than during the day, but the actual level of security was markedly higher. It was simply made to look more lax so no one would realize that fact.

Archbishop Laura Stuart was in the bath.

“Hm hm hm hm hm hmm♪”

For those who had noble visions and aspirations about Lambeth Palace, the sight of that brightly-lit room with nothing but humming echoing through it may have utterly shocked them.

It was called a bath, but the huge space was 20 meters square. But despite that size, it was not designed as a single large bath. Several dozen small premade bathtubs were crammed into the room.

And each of those bathtubs had some function that stank of the science side. There was an electric bath, a negative ion bath, a water jet massage bath, and many others.

They had all been sent to Laura from acquaintances in Academy City, seemingly as Bon festival gifts and year-end gifts.

Currently, Laura was using both hands to hold up the skirt of her beige habit, sitting on the edge of a water jet bath, and sticking just her feet into the bathtub.

She did have basin-like baths meant to be footbaths, but Laura seemed to like sticking her feet into those water jets.

Her blonde hair, that was twice as long as she was tall, looked like a spider web with raindrops in it because the steam had washed over it, but she could easily fix that later. She was focused on the footbath for the moment.

(Nnn… Now this is happiness. Okay, after I loosen up my feet, I can warm my entire body in that electric bath.)

While Laura Stuart tried to get rid of the weariness of the day, Stiyl Magnus seemed to almost smash down the door as he suddenly charged in without knocking.

“Archbishop!!” shouted that outrageous priest who had his hair dyed red, a cigarette in his mouth, silver rings on all ten of his fingers, a barcode tattoo under his right eye, and the smell of perfume and nicotine mixed together.

Laura jumped in surprise.

Even if it was just a footbath, she had her skirt pulled up quite a bit, exposing her bare legs. Laura frantically tried to lower her skirt, but her sudden movement caused her hips to slip, sending her spilling magnificently off the edge of the bathtub she was sitting on.

A loud splash like that of a crashing wave spread through the room.

With report in hand, Stiyl paid that no heed.

“Is what this report says true!? This better not be another demonstration of your skill at being a complete moron. The words of the Archbishop can cause the world to move, so you need to be more-… Stop blowing bubbles below the water and answer me! You wrote this, didn’t you!?”

In reality, she was only blowing bubbles because a water jet was blasting her in the face and she could not breathe, but Stiyl could see nothing but a woman splashing around in the bathtub with her legs spread out in an M-shape and her

panties clearly visible.

With another splash, Laura forcefully brought her head out of the water.

“Wh-wh-wh-why would you suddenly charge into a lady’s bath with your shoes still on, Stiyl!? And even if I am a member of the clergy…no, specifically *because* I am a member of the clergy, I cannot let you see me like thi-…”

“Please. Just. Answer. Me!!”

“Stop, Stiyl!! If you stab your flame sword into the water, the bath will boil!!”

Laura practically fell out of the bathtub as she escaped. In the next instant, the water did not just boil; it underwent a slight phreatic explosion. The Archbishop lay on the wet floor, opening and closing her mouth as she gasped for air. Her long, long hair was wrapped around her like a cocoon, making her look like some kind of monster.

The veins on Stiyl’s temple bulged out and he said, “Please just reread this report and explain it in detail for me. I just want to get my work done with so I can get to bed. Why do I have to look after such a lonely woman?”

But Laura was not listening.

“Ah!! The bathwater is causing my habit to stick to my skin, revealing the impure lines of my body! You mustn’t look, Stiyl! Turn around! I do not intend to let anyone see my underwear!!”

“…”

A crunching sound could be heard.

It was the sound of Stiyl biting through the filter of his cigarette.

“W-wait, Stiyl! If you strike me directly with your flame sword, I will burn away!!”

Laura fled and Stiyl gave chase with a flame sword in one hand.

It did not look like he would get any sleep that night either.

Chapter 2: What kind of penalty game?
Pair_Contract.

Part 1

Misaka Mikoto stood in the plaza in front of a concert hall.

That was where they had agreed to meet.

“…Where is he?”

She was getting tired of standing alone a bit away from the plaza while watching friends and lovers meeting up.

Mikoto was still wearing Tokiwadai Middle School’s uniform. She was also still carrying her thin school bag and violin case. They would get in the way while having fun, but dropping them off at her dorm would be a pain in its own way. She could normally enter and leave as she pleased, but she was sometimes thoroughly questioned about where she was headed when she had the bad luck to be caught by someone like the dorm supervisor.

And so instead of heading back to her dorm, she had headed straight to the spot they had agreed to meet at. That way she knew she would not be late. It seemed Shirai Kuroko was nearby, so she had called the other girl to take her things back to their dorm room, but…

“Why are neither of them coming?” muttered Mikoto blankly.

She had hoped to quickly force her baggage onto Shirai and then kill the rest of the time in a café, but she ended up just standing there the entire time because not even Shirai arrived.

She sighed and wondered why she had gone to such a great effort to ensure she was not late when Kamijou did not seem to have a problem with running late himself.

But even if she wished she could take her baggage back to the dorm, the appointed time had already passed. If she left now, they might just miss each other.

Mikoto sighed again and her shoulders drooped exhaustedly.

“Come to think of it, I don’t even know that idiot’s number. …But asking him myself would piss me off too much.”

She was tired of standing, so she placed her thin school bag and violin case on the ground and crouched down. The bag was fine, but the case looked like it had antique value. Nevertheless, Mikoto did not seem to care. It merely functioned as a case in her mind.

And as weariness wrapped around that rich girl…

“There you are! You are Misaka Mikoto-san, right!?”

A bright girl’s voice came her way. Hearing her name, Mikoto looked up with a look that seemed to say “What’s this?”

A middle school girl smaller than Mikoto stood there. She wore a sailor uniform and had lots of artificial flowers on top of her short, black hair. Mikoto thought she was a member of Judgment just like Shirai Kuroko. She had a tendency to hang around Shirai more than speak to Mikoto directly.

“It’s…Uiharu Kazari-san, right?”

“Wow, you remembered!”

Uiharu’s eyes sparkled.

The look in her eyes was one of pure envy. However, she longed for the world of rich girls she saw in this “upperclassman from Tokiwadai Middle School” rather than for Mikoto herself, so those sparkling eyes were of a different sort from Shirai’s. This was nothing more than healthy admiration.

Uiharu timidly asked, “Um…Shirai-san was supposed to come get your things, right?”

“Hm?” Mikoto frowned.

Uiharu was looking at the school bag and violin case lying on the ground.

“Well…You see… Shirai-san had some Judgment work forced onto her…no, I mean she is working very hard, so she will probably be a bit late. She really wants to come here herself, but I came instead because it did not look like that was going to happen anytime soon.”

Mikoto was about to accept that explanation, but she stopped.

Shirai was a close (strictly in a completely normal sense) friend of hers, so she did not hesitate to ask something like that of her, but she could not leave that job to this innocent girl. Also, Uiharu was not a student of Tokiwadai Middle School. She could not enter the dorm, so she would have to hand it off to someone at the dorm to bring it to Mikoto’s room.

In the worst case scenario, that could even be the dorm supervisor.

The dorm supervisor was mature enough to cheerfully accept the items from Uiharu with a smile, but she would become a demon king of rage once Mikoto returned to the dorm.

And so Mikoto casually waved her hand.

“If Kuroko isn’t coming, that’s fine. I can leave it with a cloakroom at a nearby hotel. They’ll let me as long as I rent out a room.”

“Yes… I guess you can’t just leave those in a coin locker.”

Uiharu looked at the violin case with nervous eyes. Her entire body made it clear she assumed that decision was made because a normal person like her could not be allowed to touch something of such value.

Mikoto waved her hand even more.

“No, no, no! I’m not doubting your ability to carry it, so don’t get so down!!”

“But…”

Uiharu trailed off.

And when she spoke again, she had changed the subject.

“Tokiwadai Middle School really is amazing. It isn’t normal to use a violin in school lessons.”

“Really? If you tried it, I think you’d find it isn’t that hard.” Mikoto noticed a hint of envy in Uiharu’s eyes as she looked at the violin. “Um…By any chance, do you wish you could go to our school?”

“N-no, no! Don’t be ridiculous!!” She was so flustered it was obvious what she actually thought. “A completely normal person like me could never even set foot in a rich girl place like that!!”

“Actually, if you have the ability, they’ll cover as much of the finances as you need. The school focuses more on what’s inside than on appearances. I’ve actually heard that some royal daughter was rejected right away.”

“I-if they do not even let royalty in, there is definitely no way I could get in… I have never even touched a violin. I think I would look pretty cool if I could play one though.”

“I don’t think you would find it as amazing as you think if you tried it.” Mikoto grabbed the violin case from the ground. “Here, I’ll prove it.”

“Eh!? You’ll play for me?”

“No, you’ll play it.”

“Bwehh!?”

Uiharu looked at Mikoto with her eyes opened wide in shock, but that young lady of Tokiwadai Middle School had already undone the case’s latch and pulled out a violin that had the old shine of an antique as well as the bow to play it with.

“Here you go.”

“Bh!? D-don’t just throw it at me!!”

Uiharu nervously took that item that’s value she could not even imagine. She stiffened up because she thought its value would go down even if she got her sweat on it, not to mention if she broke it.

Mikoto stood next to Uiharu and casually pointed at the various parts of the violin.

“Okay, just do what I tell you. Hold the violin in your left hand and use your right hand to play it with that stick-like thing. Hold the bottom of the instrument between your chin and collarbone. It’s a pretty cheap violin, so don’t worry about holding it too tightly.”

But even if it was cheap, it was cheap according to the values of a rich girl. Uiharu was about ready to shove that bomb back into Mikoto’s arms and run away, but she could not bear to take any bold actions because she felt it would affect the rest of her life if she broke the instrument in the process.

Mikoto was puzzled as to why Uiharu was standing there not moving a muscle.

“Sorry, sorry. I guess it isn’t enough to just tell you.”

“Y-yes.”

“Then I’ll show you directly. Go like this.”

“Wehhh!?”

Uiharu cried out because Mikoto gently wrapped her arms around her from behind and grabbed the violin. It looked like a mother kindly teaching her young child.

Uiharu froze up even further at this unexpected intimacy, but Mikoto did not seem to notice. It was a complete coincidence, but when Mikoto began her lecture, she did so with her breath blowing right into Uiharu's ear.

"Holding the strings with your left hand is important, but let's start with how to use the bow with your right hand. It might look hard at first, but all you really have to do is hold it at the correct angle to the strings while you play."

Mikoto gently moved her hands that were placed over Uiharu's hands. A single quiet tone came from the violin like when it was being tuned.

Uiharu's face had gone beet red and her eyes were spinning, so she was not listening to a thing Mikoto said, but Mikoto was completely unaware of this. With the exception of people like Shirai, Mikoto was generally kind to girls.

"The sound changes depending on how you use your left hand. Pizzicato, glissando, flageolet. Well, there are a lot of different methods, but none of them are particularly hard. How about we try them all one at a time? Oh, you'll get used to it in no time. Don't worry."

Uiharu could feel Mikoto's body heat on her back, her sweet breath on her ear, and her soft fingers around Uiharu's own hands.

(S-so this is the hierarchy of rich girls that Shirai-san has fallen for!!)

At that point, Mikoto finally noticed how stiff Uiharu was.

In an attempt to help the other girl relax, she said, "Don't worry. This is a large plaza so it has no regulations regarding performances. No one's going to get after you for using an instrument."

"N-no, that is not what I-…Wait, performance!? Hyah! When did all these people gather around? Why am I the center of atten-…"

Uiharu's shocked cry cut off partway through.

This was because she spotted Shirai Kuroko in the crowd and she had quite a magnificent expression on her face.

“Gyaaaaaahhhhhhh!!”

Uiharu’s shoulder’s jumped in shock.

Unnatural strength entered her arm and a horrible screeching noise came from the instrument.

As Shirai watched on, she projected her thoughts toward her colleague who was standing in the center of the crowed.

“(Oh, so that’s it. You acted like you were being admirable by helping me out, but you actually had this ulterior motive. I can’t take my eyes of you for even a second, can I? And I have never had such a wonderful experience myself. Why, onee-sama?)”

Were it being shown on television, her expression would likely have violated the broadcasting rules and been blurred out.

A cold sweat started to drip down Uiharu Kazari’s body, but Misaka Mikoto was clueless once again.

“What’s wrong?”

“N-nothing!!”

“Is someone suspicious staring at you or something?”

“Don’t say it like that!!”

Uiharu was almost in tears, but Mikoto never even thought of the possibility of Shirai being there.

Part 2

They had agreed to meet at 1 PM.

“Why is it already 1:30!?” shouted Misaka Mikoto while she stood alone in the plaza in front of the concert hall that made a decent landmark.

Kamijou ran over to her as quickly as he could while bowing his head and holding his hands together.

“Yeah, sorry about that!!”

In truth, he was running late because the issues surrounding Tsuchimikado Motoharu’s food supply had turned into a slight fistfight, but he decided it would be better to simply apologize than to make excuses.

Mikoto folded her arms, tapped the ground with her right foot, and sent bluish-white sparks flying from her bangs.

“I was the winner of the punishment game, so why am I the one forced to put up with your issues? Do you have any idea what it feels to be stuck standing here for everyone to see for an entire hour? Some weird guys called out to me, and I had to go to the effort of driving each of them away with a lightning spear.”

“Yeah! Yeah! And like I said, I’m really sorry!”

Kamijou tried to get by with completely meaningless small talk, but then he suddenly realized something Mikoto had said didn’t make sense.

“Wait. We agreed to meet at one, right?”

“…Don’t tell me you’re trying to say you forgot.”

“No, I’m not. You said you were waiting for an hour, so did you get hear a full half hour ahead of time? Wow, I am sorry then.”

Mikoto’s shoulders jumped in shock and her eyes opened wide.

She unfolded her arms and started shaking her hands in front of her.

“No…D-don’t be stupid. I was just giving a general amount. I haven’t literally been here for 60 minutes. I-I won, so why should I have to wait around for you? I’d rather you didn’t imagine strange scenarios and grin like that.”

“You…” said Kamijou without thinking. He looked the flustered middle school girl straight in the face. “You wanted to see me suffer in this punishment that badly? I’ve had my suspicions before, but you really are a cruel person deep dow-…”

Before he could finish speaking, a lightning spear shot from Mikoto’s bangs.

Kamijou repelled the blast with the right hand he had immediately held up. From the tremendous zapping sound it made, the voltage had to have been in the hundreds of millions.

His right hand held a power known as Imagine Breaker and it could negate any supernatural power whether it was magical or psychic in nature.

But that did not mean nothing scared him.

While trembling, Kamijou said, “…So I hit the nail on the head?”

Another lightning spear flew at him.

The great noise caused the couples gathered in the concert hall plaza to scream and run away. Kamijou had managed to stop it at the last second, but he had tears in his eyes.

“Just tell me, Misaka-san! What do you want me to say!?”

“Let’s just get going,” muttered Mikoto as the corner of her lips twitched and she turned her head to the side slightly. “Don’t you dare try to oppose me after losing back then, you piece of shit.”

“There’s something wrong with this high-class lady from Tokiwadai!!” shouted Kamijou, but Mikoto gave no real reaction and merely continued to look extremely displeased. Realizing he was not going to have an easy time dealing with her, he scratched at his head and said, “So, Misaka. What kind of punishment is this going to be? You said to get going, but where are we headed?”

As soon as he said that…

“Uh?” said Mikoto with a blank look on her face.

She looked over at Kamijou.

In complete shock, he said, “Don’t tell me you don’t even have anything planned.”

“I-I have something planned!! Um…uh…well…Oh, right! I’m going to have you make up for the effort I expended to win in the Daihaseisai!!”

“So essentially you have nothing concrete planned.”

“Listen to what I’m saying!!”

“You’re the one that brought it up, so you come up with the plan. Surely you know I’m not going to think up punishments I have to undergo myself. You sure are stupid.”

“…”

Mikoto fell silent, but then looked Kamijou in the eye again.

“Um, Misaka…Uuhh!?”

When she continued her silence, Kamijou started to speak to her, but then he stopped and took a step back without thinking.

The reason for this was simple.

That young lady’s eyes were filled with anger.

Kamijou had a very bad feeling about what was to come.

“You will do whatever I tell you for this punishment, right?”

“Oh, well… Yes, but only if you keep things reasonable!!”

“You’ll do *whatever* I say, right?”

“…”

“Come with me.”

“To where!?” shouted Kamijou, but Mikoto grabbed his hand and refused to let go.

She dragged him away from the concert hall plaza like that.

She then said, “Just shut up and come with me! That’s your first punishment!!”

“First!? There’s more than one punishment!?”

Kamijou Touma’s face paled while Misaka Mikoto’s grew red with anger.

They were currently walking around town hand in hand, but for better or worse, neither one was aware of that fact.

Part 3

Accelerator was looking up at an apartment building meant for teachers.

Residences in Academy City were primarily nothing but student dormitories, so students did not often set foot in this kind of apartment.

From the outside, the apartment building did not look that different from a student dorm building, but the small differences in the service side of things gave it an overall distinctive feel. The student dorms were essentially buildings meant to control children. In the name of security, the dorms were known to go a bit overboard with the positioning of the security cameras, but this apartment building gave more thought to the wishes of the residents in their placement.

“Which floor?” asked Accelerator to Yomikawa Aiho who had led them there.

With a smile, she replied, “The 13th. It’s a pain when the power goes out and I have to take the stairs.”

“Ohh,” said Last Order as she looked up at the tall building.

It seemed she was trying to look at the 13th floor, but the sun got in her eyes and

she shook her head dizzily.

Yoshikawa Kikyou supported her small shoulders from behind.

“Well, I suppose there is much less opportunity for attack than the 1st or 2nd floor,” said the woman.

“The upper floors take a lot more damage when the entire building is blown away.”

No one had ever gone that far while Accelerator had stayed in the dorms, but he had no guarantee that would remain true in the future.

Yomikawa pulled out a laminated card that was likely used to open the self-locking door and said, “Now then, now then. It’s a bit late, but we still need to eat some lunch. Let’s hurry up and get to the room.”

The entrance to the apartment building was an automatic glass door that looked defenseless at first, but it appeared to be made to resist explosions. The lock appeared to only require a swipe of the card, but it actually scanned the fingerprints, the pattern of bioelectric signals, and other data from the fingertips holding the card.

Realizing this was quite a high-class apartment building, Accelerator looked at Yomikawa with suspicion in his eyes.

“I thought they were reducing the salaries of public servants.”

“Even with the fairly low pay, I manage somehow. This place doubles as a practical experiment in construction, so the university pays some of the rent. But in exchange, the security measures will sometimes suddenly change,” explained Yomikawa. “Also, Anti-Skill may not pay anything since it’s a volunteer force, but enough people appreciate what you do that it comes with some nice perks. I can get meat at the supermarket really cheap.”

“…You treat help on your apartment’s rent the same as getting a good sale at the supermarket?”

As they spoke, Accelerator, Last Order, Yomikawa, and Yoshikawa entered the apartment building. Komoe-sensei was not with them because she had other

business to take care of.

They rode a low-vibration elevator that was probably one of the prototypes being tested. It allowed them to reach the 13th floor without the odd floating feeling usually felt in an elevator. The door right next to the elevator led to Yomikawa's room.

"Come in," said Yomikawa as she opened the front door.

Inside, they found a 4LDK. The room was clearly meant for a family and was large enough that one would normally have to spend their whole life paying back a loan for it. No matter how much the university paid for cooperation with the experiments, Accelerator seriously wondered how anyone could afford it on a public servant's salary.

The living room's flooring was polished to a shine and it was overall much tidier than one expected of someone living alone. The bottles of alcohol and glasses were arranged decoratively on shelves and the magazines and newspapers were stored on special racks. The remote controls for the TV, air conditioner, stereo, video recorder, and other devices were neatly lined up at one corner of the table. Each individual cushion on the sofa was carefully placed in the proper spot.

Last Order's eyes opened wide.

"Wow, wow! There's almost no dust, praises Misaka as Misaka leaps onto the sofa," said Last Order in a cheerful voice.

As the girl sank into the soft sofa, Yoshikawa sighed and said, "You've gotten into trouble at work again, haven't you?"

Yomikawa's track-suit-wearing form shook in shock.

"Ah…Ah ha ha. What are you talking about?"

"What do you mean? says Misaka as Misaka rolls around and looks confused."

"She has always had a habit of cleaning up her room whenever she gets into some kind of trouble. And she just cleans like crazy without thinking of the consequences, so sometimes she can't find the room key afterwards. You need to be careful."

“Is that anything to say about the person who is helping you find a new job?”

Accelerator noticed Yomikawa and Yoshikawa spoke in a slightly childish manner when speaking to each other. It was possible they had simply been around each other for that long. If Yoshikawa played the role of the helpful class president, then Yomikawa played the role of the problem student who was always late.

Yoshikawa looked over towards the kitchen that connected to the living room.

“Since that habit is still there, I assume your habit in the kitchen hasn’t changed either.”

“Hey, hey! I’ll admit I have a bad habit about cleaning, but don’t bring that up, Kikyou! Not to mention that you seem to like my cooking well enough when you have some.”

“*As long as I don’t know how you made it.*”

Accelerator and Last Order exchanged a confused glance. Yomikawa said, “My skills are improving every day. See for yourself!” and dragged Yoshikawa into the kitchen, so they followed the two women.

Yomikawa’s kitchen had many different types of cooking equipment lined up in it that she had as part of the experiment. With a steam microwave oven, an AI-equipped high frequency automatic dishwasher, and other such devices, it all seemed very mechanical.

But it seemed Yomikawa did not use those things much.

Those cooking devices were overflowing with a sense that they just sat there without being used. The only items that really appeared to get used were the four or five electric rice cookers. From the steam coming from them, they all appeared to be functional.

With an annoyed look, Accelerator said, “One for each of us, hm? Are you fucking with us, you white rice obsessed freak?”

“No, no. That’s not it at all.” Yomikawa pointed at each of the rice cookers in turn. “These rice cookers can do anything you want: boil, simmer, steam, or

bake. This one is baking bread, a stew is cooking in that one, and that one is steaming fish.”

“…”

Accelerator felt he understood what Yoshikawa had meant.

Yoshikawa had been aware of the situation ahead of time, so she could only sigh when she saw nothing had changed.

“You’re such a sloth.”

“Don’t treat me like some weird animal. And what’s so wrong with this? If everything is prepared right, they’ll do all the cooking for you at the push of a button. And it doesn’t use any fire, so you don’t have to worry if you take a nap.”

“I remember when you bought a large hotplate saying you could make okonomiyaki out of any leftovers as long as you had flour. And let’s not forget that nonsense about never needing anything but a pressure cooker because you can cook anything you need for the rest of your life with it. You just take everything to too much of an extreme. It’s so bad that if you would probably get an antimatter reaction if you tried to average your two extremes together.”

“It tastes fine, it’s nutritious, and it fills you up, so what’s the problem? Preparing a stock pot and a frying pan and everything else is such a pain. I just want one thing that can do everything.”

“Sigh. You just need to learn the joy of putting all your effort into making something.”

But Yoshikawa’s comment was not as innocent as it might sound since she specialized in genetics and what she had “made” was just over 20,000 human clones.

Part 4

Mikoto dropped her violin off at a cloakroom and dragged Kamijou into an underground mall.

The location had taken quite a bit of damage on September 1st when the magician Sherry Cromwell had come from England with her golem Ellis, but none of the scars caused by the destruction could be seen anymore. The shattered floors and pillars had been repaired and the café windows and the like had been replaced with new ones. Unless you looked very closely, you would never notice anything had changed.

The construction had been completed at such a quick pace because of the Daihaseisai coming up so soon afterwards. Around half of the reason Academy City was opened up to the public was to act as propaganda to improve the city's image, so they could hardly allow parts of it to be destroyed at the time. (It still ended up getting destroyed a fair bit on the first day of the festival, though.)

The area did not have the dark image one expected of being underground. The floors and walls were polished to a shine and it was lit up as bright as midday with fluorescent lights and LED light bulbs. The cafes, clothing stores, and the like lining the passageway used a lot of glass to give an open feeling despite the low surface area.

Kamijou looked around and said, "Oh, they're keeping the air conditioning a lot lower than they used to."

"In another 2 weeks, they'll probably switch over to heating." Mikoto walked along step by step. "Oh, there it is. Over here."

She pointed at one store with a slender finger.

Due to the advantages of being underground, the area gathered a lot of recreational facilities that made a lot of noise like arcades, karaoke boxes, and live music clubs. That was why Kamijou had assumed he was going to be ordered to complete an extremely difficult game with a single coin and have to bow down to her if he failed. But it turned out his guess was way off.

She was pointing at a cell phone service store.

It was only about half as big as a convenience store. All that he could see inside through the large glass window was a counter and chairs lined up horizontally

and a magazine rack filled with thin catalogues of cell phone models. The vertical advertisement banner hanging in front of the entrance divided the models up between the major companies and Academy City's originals.

Academy City's technology was said to be 20 to 30 years more advanced than that outside the city. The outside models and inside models each had their own advantages and disadvantages, but you never knew which service would recover first in an emergency, so some students struggled for over a week to decide which one to go with.

Mikoto walked toward the service store.

"Have you heard of the Handy Antenna service?"

"Hm? Oh, that. You mean the service that allows each individual cell phone to act in the place of a cell phone tower to let you call even when there isn't a tower nearby?"

Basically, the cell phones of everyone walking around the city would act as relay antennae. Even if there was no cell phone tower near Kamijou, he could connect via Person 1, Person 2, Person 3, etc. and eventually connect to Person X who was near a cell phone tower. And it connected using a route that went through several people in something like a net, so the connection would not be easily dropped. The technology had apparently developed to create an emergency air communications network through a few antennae installed on blimps that could be sent out if the normal towers were brought down in a disaster. For that reason, not much had been done to ensure sound quality when the method was used.

On the plus side, a university was helping pay to have it tested, so the service fees were supposed to be incredibly cheap.

"I was thinking of signing up for that."

"Eh? But that extremely minor system only works if its users all walk around with their cell phones constantly on to act as relay antennae. I heard it drains your battery like crazy. And I heard so few people are signed up for it that it really doesn't help much."

"That's why they're working to get more people to join the service. If you sign up for a pair contract, even the fees unrelated to the Handy Antenna are mostly

covered for you.”

“A pair contract…? You mean that thing where you take two people who already have contracts and make it so calls and packets between the two phones don’t cost anything?”

“Yes, that. And right now, if you sign up for a package deal for both the Handy Antenna service and a pair contract, they give you a Lovely Mitten Gekota strap. It’s a frog mascot.”

“…Wait.”

“They give it to you right away, so sign up for it with me.”

“So you’re just after the strap!? I’m not changing my phone no matter what you say! I’m going to use this beat-up cell phone for at least another 6 months!!”

And then Kamijou pointed at Mikoto’s school bag. He was glaring at the green frog mascot hanging from it.

“And you already have a frog!”

“Gekota and this one are not the same thing!!” shouted Mikoto. “Gekota is the old man who lives next to this one and he is called Gekota because he goes ‘geko geko’ when he gets carsick! Are you really so old that you don’t know even a basic difference like that!?”

“…What about that old man Gekota character is ‘lovely’?” muttered Kamijou in a disheartened tone, but Mikoto only gave him the scornful look children gave the elderly when they could not keep up with the current trends. She seemed to have been a bit disillusioned.

“Hmph. You don’t need to worry about having to change your phone. The Handy Antenna just needs to add a chip to your phone and the pair contract will work with any of this company’s services, so you should be able to use your current phone without changing much of anything.”

“Oh, so you really just need to put my number and address on the paperwork?”

“Well, yes.” Mikoto squeezed the small frog on her school bag between her

fingertips. “It isn’t easy finding someone who is willing to come down to the store with me, fill out a ton of paperwork, and wait for who knows how many hours. But it shouldn’t take more than half a day, so just bear with it.”

“Hmm,” muttered Kamijou as he thought while looking at the store’s banner.

(I guess she called me out here because it has to be a guy and girl pair.)

“? What is it?” asked Mikoto.

“Well, just going with you to register for this is fine, but a pair contract is usually only made between a boyfriend and girlfriend, right? It says it has to be a guy and a girl.”

“…!?”

Mikoto’s shoulders gave a large jump.

Her fingers squeezed tightly around the frog mascot on her bag.

“N-n-n-n-no, you idiot! What are you saying!? J-just because it says it has to be a guy and a girl doesn’t mean it has to be a boyfriend and girlfriend! It could easily be a married couple!!”

“Um, hello? That’s taking things a step further from boyfriend and girlfriend, Misaka-san.”

He had only meant to give a calm rebuttal, but he ended up having a lightning spear fly his way. Kamijou frantically held up his right hand to repel the strike that flew from Mikoto’s bangs.

“What is with you today!?”

“Y-you’re the one that isn’t making any sense! C’mon, let’s just get this over with!!”

“Eh? We’re actually going to do it!?”

“This is your punishment, so quit complaining and come with me!!”

Mikoto grabbed Kamijou’s arm and dragged him into the service store.

The air conditioning was more comfortable in the store than in the underground mall's passageway. Kamijou was not sure if it really made sense, but it felt like the ventilation route was calculated out to provide the perfect temperature where you did not feel cold or get sweaty.

The young female worker sitting behind the counter had her smile crumble a bit when she saw Mikoto dragging Kamijou into the store, but she did not forget her training.

After a few comments from Mikoto including "I want to register a pair contract with this idiot" and "Do you have any of the Gekota straps left?", the worker gathered a ton of paperwork on the counter.

"The paperwork requires a photograph. Do you have one?"

"Hm?" said Mikoto with her eyes opened wide. She then asked, "Will a photo from an ID photo booth be enough? How many do you need and what size do you need?"

"No, no. It does not have to be anything that formal," said the worker with a smile. "This is a pair contract, so we just need something that proves that the two of you are a 'pair'. As long as it is a two shot of the two of you, it can just be with a cell phone camera. We also provide you with a pair picture frame charger cradle, so you can use it for that as well. It fits the standards for the four major companies, so you should be able to use it regardless of model."

"Bh!?" Mikoto very nearly did a spit take. "…A-a two shot?"

"Oh, do you not normally do those? Then this is a perfect opportunity. We just need the photo in the 20 minutes it takes to complete the registration, so please take the photo while you wait."

After quickly filling out the huge amount of paperwork with ballpoint pens, Kamijou and Mikoto left the service store. They were going to take the photo in question.

Kamijou pulled out his fairly durable cell phone that had survived being damaged in battles with magicians and falling into the Adriatic Sea.

"I don't feel like hunting down an ID photo booth, so let's just snap a photo with

my cell phone. Unless you have another digital camera, Misaka."

"Eh? No…I left my phone at the counter."

Mikoto's mind seemed to be somewhere else, but Kamijou did not notice. While looking at the screen, he pressed a few buttons with his thumb to switch over to camera mode. Then he stretched his arm out as far as he could.

Still looking at the screen, he said, "Okay, here goes…wait."

"Wh-what?"

When Mikoto let out that flustered voice, a displeased expression appeared on Kamijou's face.

At some point, Mikoto had moved away from him. It was as if she was saying, "How about you just take it in panorama mode? I really don't care."

Mikoto's desire to flee from him made Kamijou's shoulders droop.

"…You were the one that wanted to do this, right?"

"Y-yes, I was!!"

Mikoto's face was a bit red and her hands holding her school bag were fidgeting nervously, but Kamijou did not interpret any of it in a favorable light.

After hesitating over whether to move closer to or farther away from Kamijou, Mikoto shouted out in desperation.

"~ ~ ~! Wait for me, Gekota!!"

She approached in one go so that her shoulder bumped into Kamijou's. Their shoulders brushed together and Mikoto tilted her head slightly so it rested on Kamijou's shoulder. That allowed both their faces to fit cleanly inside the cell phone's screen.

Meanwhile, Kamijou started to wonder why she had gotten closer than necessary and his body tensed up slightly at the scent of her hair.

"H-here goes."

“Okay, I’m ready when you are!!”

With an electronic tone, the phone took the picture.

Kamijou brought the cell phone back towards himself and displayed the picture he had just taken.

…

“Your face is a bit stiff, Misaka.”

“Why are you averting your gaze away from me?”

Kamijou and Mikoto exchanged a glance.

“This doesn’t look like a pair to me.”

“L-let’s take another one.”

The electronic tone sounded once more.

Kamijou and Mikoto looked at the screen.

“Again, why is your expression so stiff, Misaka!?”

“Why are you shifting your weight away from me!?”

Kamijou and Mikoto glared at each other at such close range that it almost looked like they were about to headbutt each other, but nothing would get done at that rate. In the worst case, their registration would be cancelled without a photo and all their time and effort would end up being for nothing. That would be a problem for Kamijou and Mikoto, but it would also be trouble for the worker.

And so in a bit of desperation, Kamijou said, “Anyway, we just have to take a two shot that makes us look like boyfriend and girlfriend, right!? C’mere, Misaka! Let’s get this done!!”

“Eh? What? Kyahh!!”

When Mikoto had an arm suddenly wrapped around her slender shoulders, her

face rapidly grew red.

In his high of desperation, Kamijou did not notice at all.

“Smile, Misaka! I don’t want to retake this again! We just need something that we can use for the paperwork! There’s no real issue here if we don’t get fixated over it!!”

“Eh? Y-yeah, that’s right. Ah ha ha! We’re just faking a photo that looks like that. Yes, it’s just a photo! Okay, let’s do this!!”

Mikoto wanted to know what he meant by “get fixated over it”, but she forced herself into a high regardless. For her, it was less out of desperation and more an attempt to keep him from noticing how red her face was. To match the arm Kamijou had wrapped around her shoulders, Mikoto wrapped an arm around Kamijou’s back and moved closer. Passersby looked at the two of them (or rather, at Mikoto) with jealous eyes, but they were in such a high that neither of them noticed.

Kamijou held his cell phone away from them again.

“Here I go!”

“Yes!!”

But before the clear electronic tone could sound…

Shirai Kuroko rapidly approached via teleportation and drop kicked Kamijou Touma in the back of the head.

With a cracking noise, the cell phone left Kamijou’s hand, his body flew forward, and the cell phone took a photo an instant too late.

As it lay on the floor, the cell phone displayed an extreme three shot of Kamijou’s horribly blurred head, Mikoto shocked face, and Shirai’s panties.

Kamijou rolled along the floor and came to a stop.

“Wh-what the hell was that!?”

“Wh-what do you think you are doing behind my back?” asked the pigtailed girl named Shirai Kuroko in a flat voice.

She landed from her drop kick and took up a position right next to Mikoto. Her body language was saying that was her spot.

“After the half day of school, I had odd jobs for Judgment forced onto me by Uiharu. After I finished all that, I headed out to find you, onee-sama, but what I found was Uiharu’s violin attack. After that I worked hard to finish the additional work she forced onto me, but then I find this. …Honestly, it was a

mistake to take you as nothing but a newcomer slave. It looks like you and onee-sama have been going around having a wonderful time…”

“Wait, make no mistake, Kuroko!” Mikoto waved her hands in front of her. “I’m not doing this because I want to! I only asked him to sign up for a pair contract because I wanted the Gekota strap and we were only taking that photo because we need it for the contract!!”

Her explanation sounded more like it was meant to convince herself than it was to convince Shirai. Either way, Kamijou had still been kicked and forced to go through with the contract.

Then again, he had lost a punishment game.

Meanwhile, Shirai was clearly unable to hide her shock at what Mikoto had said.

“Th-then you did not need to bow your head to this gentleman! You could have just made a pair with me, onee-sama! Now, let us take a photo nice and quick! We can make a lifelong memory right now!!”

Shirai fell into such a high that it looked like she was about to boil over and Mikoto’s face twitched, but Kamijou suddenly raised his head from the ground and spoke.

“Eh? In that case, can I go home now?”

“It has to be a pair between a guy and a girl!!”

That honest question caused Mikoto to fire a lightning spear with all her might.

Part 5

Accelerator opened his eyes slightly as he lay on top of the sofa.

He clicked his tongue.

“…I fell asleep.”

He checked the clock, but he had only been out for about 15 minutes.

Since the TV was still on, it had likely been what woke him. He had a feeling he had been sleeping lightly lately so that any sudden stimulus would wake him.

Accelerator shook his head a bit in the otherwise deserted living room.

(You’re getting too relaxed, you damn idiot.)

His own annoyed voice entered his mind.

Accelerator had originally been the type to get sleep at his own pace. Whether an alarm clock went off right next to his ear, a brat was screaming at him, or a bomb exploded on top of his stomach, he would just continue sleeping soundly.

This was because he had the power to alter all types of vectors, so he normally reflected all vectors except for the bare minimum he needed such as oxygen and gravity.

While in that state, Accelerator would remain unscathed even if he was directly hit by a nuclear bomb.

That was why Accelerator did not hesitate to enter that horribly defenseless state of sleep even with the huge number of enemies he had.

But that was when his power had been fully functioning.

Accelerator reached up to his neck.

An electrode that looked like a black choker was located there. The device linked to the brains of the almost 10,000 Sisters who were scattered around the world. It allowed him to borrow their massive parallel processing ability.

Accelerator’s brain had been injured on August 31st.

He required that calculation assistance device to live an ordinary life as an esper. The normal mode that allowed him to walk, talk, count, etc. could last for 48 hours. However, the esper mode that allowed him full use of his vector control

power would drain the battery in only about 15 minutes due to the massive amount of calculations that needed to be carried out every instant. It was quite a restrictive item.

That meant he effectively had only 15 minutes of safe time.

Other than during those 15 minutes, he was a weakling who could not even walk without recharging that battery once every 48 hours.

That condition robbed him of the luxury of obtaining his sleep in that shelter provided by his powers.

"…"

Accelerator looked over at the giant flat-screen TV with suspicious eyes.

The most popular afternoon talk show was playing on a cable channel that required a ridiculously expensive contract. The deck placed below the TV was in recording mode, so Yomikawa may have been a fan of the entertainer who was on the show as a guest.

"Hitotsui Hajime-san, you played the leading role in the movie. What was it like? It seems to me having a Japanese actor play the lead role in a foreign film is fairly rare. Did it feel especially different to you?"

The moderator and guest faced each other on either side of a small table.

While watching the screen, Accelerator reached up to the switch on the side of his choker-style electrode.

And he turned it off.

"*Well, the most characteristic instruction next to the plot was to appropriately function as Japanese. He did not have Even, and did the other people appropriately understand as Japanese today?*"

The words were all jumbled up.

The guest had actually said "Let's see, the most peculiar instruction from the director was to behave like a Japanese person. But do we even know what it

means to be Japanese nowadays?", but Accelerator's head was unable to properly process the meaning of the words that entered his ears.

He wavered as he lost his balance.

Before he even realized it, he had collapsed down into the sofa. He could see the digital numbers on the video recording deck, but he could not discern what they meant. His head seemed to be missing a gear. He felt like he was looking at a question from a state examination after going 100 hours straight without any sleep.

(Kh…)

Accelerator brought his hand to his neck.

His entire body was unsteady and it took him several seconds just to flip the small switch. He fumbled with it several times before finally touching the protrusion of the switch with his thumb.

It made a small click.

With the electrode switched back to normal mode, Accelerator finally returned to the normal world.

"I had to speak in the native American English, but I was told to keep my gestures, manners, and overall behavior noticeably 'Japanese', so I had to think over what that meant."

The entertainer's obvious bragging continued in Accelerator's field of vision as he lay on his side.

He had once been known as Academy City's strongest esper, but now he was stuck in this condition.

Without Last Order and the rest of Sisters performing calculations for him, he could not use his powers or even speak, walk, or count normally. He needed that choker-style electrode around his neck for those proxy calculations, and its battery only lasted 48 hours at the absolute most.

If the battery died, if he went deep underground, or if a jamming signal was

used, he could no longer use those proxy calculations.

And that was just for normal mode.

When he used esper mode, such a massive number of calculations had to be made that the time limit suddenly dropped to just under 15 minutes. The electrode was meant to be a medical device, so it was not made to withstand a military environment like an esper battle. And the battery was a special model created by the frog-faced doctor, so he could not swap it out for a commercial battery. That meant he could not stock up on batteries to extend that time limit.

In other words, his time limit truly was 15 minutes.

But when in that mode, he did not need to use his cane.

(Learning all these damn rules is a pain in the ass. Honestly, I'm not Cinderella. Having a time limit for being the strongest is no laughing matter.)

"…"

Having decided to take a shower, Accelerator got up from the couch.

He hoped it would help improve his mood.

He already knew Last Order eternally had no defenses, but Accelerator was annoyed at how casually Yomikawa and Yoshikawa were taking everything. They were all being too trusting of Academy City's strongest esper. He had never said he would lift a finger to live up to their expectations. Yomikawa and Yoshikawa did not properly understand how frightening a being he was. Accelerator was used to destroying, but he was not at all used to protecting. There was a very real risk of him causing a great disaster for everything and everyone around him when he was only intending to strike in defense.

(Come to think of it, there's no one else here. Are those idiots out shopping?)

With that offhand thought, Accelerator opened the door to the changing room.

And there he found a naked Last Order having her brown hair dried with a bath towel.

Yomikawa and Yoshikawa were also naked and doing the drying from either side of the girl.

Last Order was the first one to react.

“Wh-why did you suddenly appear with no warning whatsoever!? says Misaka as Misaka reaches out for a bath towel but cannot reach it!!”

Accelerator ignored Last Order’s shouting and looked toward Yomikawa and Yoshikawa with a blank look.

“…Why didn’t you lock the door?”

“Oh, sorry, sorry. I’ve lived alone for so long I forget you could do that. My bad, my bad.”

“Aiho, at least cover yourself with a towel.”

Having already covered her own body with a towel, Yoshikawa sighed and handed Yomikawa a towel. Looking annoyed, Yomikawa wrapped the towel around herself. While this did cover her, it left as much of her thighs exposed as a miniskirt. And she must not have finished drying herself yet because the towel stuck to her and made the lines of her body perfectly visible.

(…What the hell is this?)

This was not a normal part of Accelerator’s everyday life. In fact, if anyone had a problem with finding a girl changing every time he opened a door, he would probably split his sides with laughter.

Last Order realized there were not enough towels for her, so she frantically hid behind Yoshikawa.

With tears in her eyes, she said, “Why are you two able to just look annoyed and grab a towel rather than panic? says Misaka as Misaka asks a simple question.”

“What?” said Yomikawa as she gave Last Order a puzzled look. “There’s no real reason. It’s just that he’s a kid and we’re adults.”

“Misaka thinks not caring about this is more of an old lady thing than an adult

thing, says Misaka as Misa-…ow ow ow ow ow!! Don't start working together to scrape Misaka's head like that! says Misaka as Misaka protests resolutely!!"

While attacking the top of Last Order's head, Yoshikawa said, "We are adults, not old ladies, right?"

"What kind of an adult gets so mad at a child like this, says Misaka as-… Owww!! You over there, help me and give me a towel! says Misaka as Misaka looks up at you with puppy dog eyes to stimulate your desire to protect me!!"

The tiny brat was shouting about something or other, but Accelerator ignored her and closed the door to the changing room.

He sighed once.

"…I thought I told you to stay on your guard."

Part 6

"And that's what happened, says Misaka as Misaka provides an after-the-fact report."

Last Order was on the street right next to Yomikawa's apartment building. She was wearing a light blue camisole with an unbuttoned men's dress shirt worn over it.

The small girl was speaking to another girl who looked like a larger version of Last Order. She was Serial Number 10032 aka Misaka Imouto.

Misaka Imouto was wearing the winter uniform of Tokiwadai Middle School, a beige blazer and a pleated skirt with a dark-blue check pattern. For the purposes of the experiment, they had originally worn the same outfit as Misaka Mikoto who was their Original, and that custom had continued on even after the experiment had ended.

The one difference from the Original was the large pair of electronic goggles on Misaka Imouto's forehead. They looked like night-vision goggles, but they also visualized data on magnetic and electric field lines that could not be seen with the naked eye.

Misaka Imouto stared at Last Order with eyes that held no discernible emotion.

"That report has already been transmitted to every Misaka via the network. Why go to the effort of restating it orally? says Misaka as she asks the obvious question."

"Sometimes we need to undergo communication using our normal 5 senses to correct errors like when a clock starts to run fast or slow! says Misaka as Misaka gives a plausible explanation!"

"If a higher model like you says so, I will accept that explanation, says Misaka as she ignores her superior's complaints with an annoyed expression. It may prove useful to Misaka's rehabilitation, says Misaka as she finds something she can use to force herself to accept this."

She had said she had an annoyed expression, but her expression did not actually change in the slightest. Last Order flailed her arms and legs around, but Misaka Imouto was not swept away by the smaller girl's pace.

Instead, she looked up at the apartment building at her own pace.

"But it certainly is foolish to be stuck standing here blankly after getting yourself locked out by the self-locking door while wandering around, says Misaka as she restates your situation. If Misaka had not happened to be walking by, you would have been left all alone, says Misaka as she secretly smiles while thinking of the individual specs of the higher model."

"It wasn't Misaka's fault! It was that unaccommodating self-locking door's fault! says Misaka as Misaka roars in indignation! It's an electric lock, but it would only beep annoyingly when Misaka tried to open it with her powers! says Misaka as Misaka swings her arms around to relieve some stress!!"

"A lock that does not budge even with an Electromaster trying to open it should be praised, says Misaka in an objective evaluation."

“Uuh…” groaned Last Order like a dog that refused to give up.

But that tiny higher model had little experience with the world, so her focus changed easily.

“By the way, Misaka was wondering something, says Misaka as Misaka points toward your forehead.”

“Hm? Misaka’s forehead is a normal size. Misaka is not a forehead character, says Misaka as she brings a hand to her forehead to check.”

“No, not that. Those goggles, says Misaka as Misaka points again.”

Last Order was focused on the electronic goggles Misaka Imouto was wearing.

With a puzzled look, the little girl asked, “Um, why does Misaka not have a pair of those goggles when every other Misaka has one? asks Misaka as Misaka gives you a jealous look.”

“Oh?” Misaka Imouto brought her fingertips to the goggles on her forehead, looked down at Last Order’s face, and then checked the goggles on her forehead again. “You and Misaka are just two different Misakas, says Misaka as she implicitly tells you to give up.”

“That kind of ‘our family has different circumstances from other families’ line isn’t enough! says Misaka as Misaka immediately begins protesting! And that reasoning means Misaka is the only one that belongs to a different family, says Misaka as Misaka brings up an even bigger problem!!”

While uttering her Misaka-filled lines and crying “Boo! Boo!”, Last Order grabbed Misaka Imouto’s skirt and started violently fanning it.

“Misaka wants one! Misaka wants one, too! says Misaka as Misaka uses her small appearance to its fullest by negotiating by throwing a tantrum!!”

“You may be trying to be cute, but that will only piss off someone of the same sex, so it has the opposite effect, says Misaka as she gives a thorough explanation.”

What might have seemed a bigger issue was the fact that Last Order was pulling

up Misaka Imouto's skirt making the panties she had worn on a whim that were tied together on either side with ribbons visible for all to see, but she did not seem to care about that.

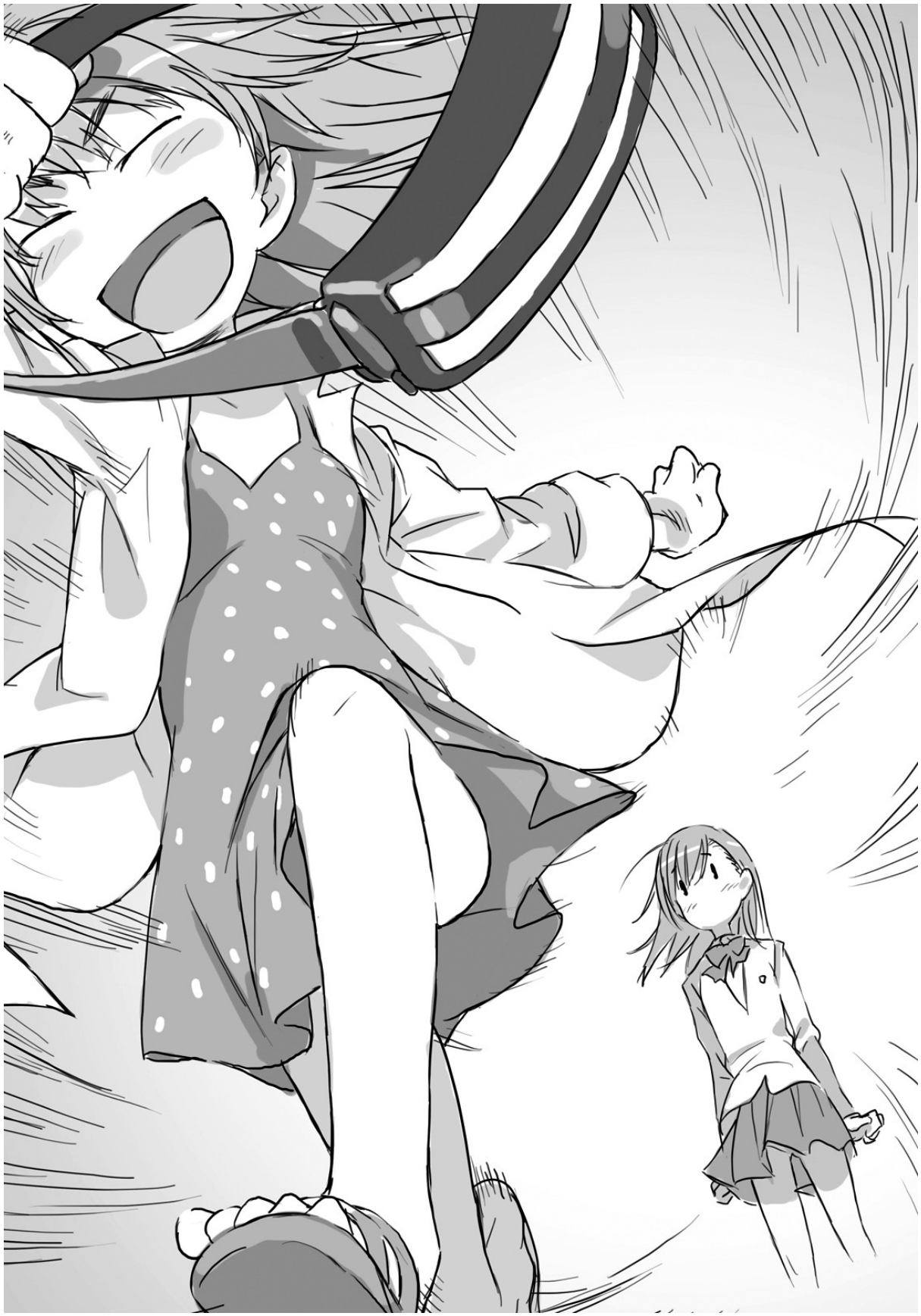
"Mmhh…" groaned Last Order at the other girl's unchanging expression. "Hey, #10032, could you give a quick bow? says Misaka as Misaka asks a favor."

"?"

Misaka Imouto looked puzzled, but she carried out the higher model's instructions nonetheless.

"Ha ha ha! You're wide open! says Misaka as Misaka succeeds in her thieving plan!!"

She vigorously swiped the goggles from the other girl's lowered head.



Before Misaka Imouto could say anything, Last Order turned her back with a delighted grin.

“If you fall for such a basic trick, Misaka might need to recheck all of the models’ routines, says Misaka as Misaka shouts out her parting line! Hah hah! If you don’t like it, come and get it back, says Misaka as Misaka dashes away while basking in the glory of victory!!”

Despite her small appearance, she disappeared somewhere with powerful strides.

“…”

For a while, Misaka Imouto stared blankly off in the direction Last Order had disappeared into.

“I cannot ignore a direct order from the higher model, says Misaka as she extremely reluctantly pulls a submachine gun and rubber bullets from her school bag.”

An ominous metallic noise reverberated throughout the peaceful street.

“Even if this is only practice, Misaka’s opponent is the higher unit, so this lower unit cannot be called immature for going all out, says Misaka as she gives the obvious interpretation. This is not at all because Misaka is pissed off. This is nothing more than a reasonable conclusion based in logic, says Misaka as she praises her own calm thought process while running at full speed with a real gun in one hand.”

She appeared expressionless at first glance, but a closer inspection showed that the corner of Misaka Imouto’s eye was twitching as she began her pursuit.

Last Order was completely aware of that emotional state while she ran down a back alley and tried to provoke her further using the Misaka Network made up of the Sister’s brainwaves and weak electromagnetic waves they produced.

“Hah hah! A normal Misaka can never defeat this Misaka, says Misaka as Misaka laughs loudly about her victory over the commoners!”

“The time for revolution has come, announces Misaka #10032.”

Between the lines 2

A building that functioned as Necessarius's women's dorm existed in the London Borough of Lambeth.

From looks alone, it did not differ much from a common stone apartment building. Unlike wooden buildings, it was harder to judge a stone building's age from how it looked. This building had a history that was measured in centuries, but no one would imagine it from looking at it. The facility was polished nicely and maintained carefully.

It had not been turned into a fortress like Lambeth Palace where the Archbishop lived. It had instead been prepared as a building that could be easily replaced if it was ever destroyed. However, it had never once been completely destroyed. It was a prime target for any enemy magic cabals that knew what it was, but every plan to do so had been crushed before it could be carried out. For that reason, the building implicitly declared Necessarius's records of victories. You could call it obvious bait.

Now then…

While it was early afternoon in Japan, it was late night in London.

Despite being in England's capital, the building was still wrapped in the cradle of nighttime due to being away from any of the main streets. However, a single window had light shining through it as if someone was staying up late.

It was the changing room.

It was located next to the large bath, so it was quite large itself. In one corner lay an empty cardboard box as large as a classroom desk. A user's manual, warranty information, and other papers were scattered along the floor.

It all belonged to a washing machine.

The user's manual said it was made in Academy City.

The electronic device did not suit the otherwise old appearance of the dorm.

“Why does the Archbishop accept these annoyingly complicated devices?” said Kanzaki Kaori with a displeased look as she connected the ground wire.

She was a woman with black hair in a ponytail long enough to reach her waist. She normally wore an active outfit made up of a T-shirt with the side tied off so that her midriff was exposed and a pair of jeans with one leg cut off at the thigh. However, she currently wore a simple yukata. Her ridiculously long Japanese sword was leaning against the wall nearby.

They had previously used a washing machine that vibrated so hard it looked like it would start spewing smoke any second, but it had finally broken not long before. It seemed even that Archbishop was willing to listen to the appeals of her subordinates.

The new washing machine had arrived that evening, but it was a cutting edge AI-equipped fully-automatic model. Kanzaki and the others had little contact with machinery, so it was similar to coming into contact with some strange advanced culture to them. While reading through the user’s manual with a puzzled look and trying this and that, night had fallen.

Kanzaki was so immersed in the work because earlier that day she had discovered a cardboard box sent from Tsuchimikado in Japan. It had contained a maid uniform + α (It was a fallen angel set containing an angel’s halo and wings) and she wanted to focus on something else to forget all about it.

“But Lady Laura said the *cutting edge A-something drum* would make all our difficult washing jobs a breeze,” said Orsola Aquinas with a smile.

She was a nun who had been part of the Roman Catholic Church until not too long ago and she wore a black nun’s habit that covered everything from her hair to her feet. Her body was as nice as Kanzaki’s, but Orsola had a rounder overall feel to her while Kanzaki had a tenser feel.

She was not the only former member of the Roman Catholic Church there. The impudent Agnese Sanctis, the strongly dutiful Lucia, and Angelene who had a sweet tooth and had difficulty waking up in the morning were there as well.

They seemed to have no intention of converting to the Anglican Church. Instead,

they said they were creating a new sect of the Roman Catholic Church in London since there were 250 of them. That would likely cause trouble if Lidvia Lorenzetti who was imprisoned in the Tower of London heard about it, but Laura Stuart seemed fairly relaxed about it all. Apparently the Amakusa Church fell under the category of a small sect as well.

In addition to those 5 was Sherry Cromwell, a genuine member of the Anglican Church. She had horribly damaged blonde hair and light brown skin. She was normally quite fond of wearing gothic lolita outfits, but she was currently wearing a thin negligee. The sleepwear had two layers, so the lines of her body could be seen through the thin material but the details could not be seen. It was similar to having her body hidden behind a layer of steam.

Sherry managed the Royal Academy of Arts, so she was using a chisel to carve a chess piece out of the small piece of marble in her hand while mostly ignoring the conversation. The small shavings gathered around her shoulder and created a small ball. It seemed to be an application of her golem Ellis.

With her gaze lowered on the chess piece she was making, Sherry said, “Can’t you just wash your clothes in a river?”

“I could manage just fine with a washboard, but washing in the river causes problems for the environment,” replied Kanzaki as she pushed the washing machine to the wall after successfully connecting the ground.

Sherry could just leave the work to her golem Ellis and Kanzaki had the tremendous strength of one of the world’s fewer than 20 Saints, so they did not mind. However, the thought made the others’ faces stiffen a bit.

“Okay, setting up the earthquake resistance reinforcements and lightning resistance equipment took some time, but it should be fine to power up now.”

Kanzaki pressed a large button, but all this achieved was causing countless numbers and symbols to display on the small water resistant LCD screen.

Kanzaki remained completely expressionless for a moment and then said, “How about we just wash everything by hand?”

“N-no! Try for just a bit longer!!” objected Angelene while half in tears. She was the weakest of the group. “We’re almost there! Th-the fully automatic washing

machine is just a step away! My arms already feel like they're about to fall off just from carrying the clothes to the other building's washing machine while we waited for this to arrive!! Th-there's no way I could wash clothes by hand!!"

From the look of Angelene's small hands, the day she was in charge of the laundry under a hand washing system would be the day she died.

Orsola looked down at the user's manual and said, "Kanzaki, Kanzaki. According the manual, the machine should take care of everything after you press the wash button."

"?"

"It says if you put detergent in the small box there, the machine will analyze its components and automatically regulate the amount of water and detergent based on the weight of the laundry. It fills, rinses, drains, and dries all on its own."

"What an annoying setup. It would be a lot simpler if you could just measure out the detergent yourself."

Agnese, Lucia, and Angelene all had the thought "But you only have to press one button" at almost the exact same time, but they remained silent as they were newcomers to the dorm.

Orsola banged her hand on the new washing machine.

"If this machine is really so convenient, I want to see it run."

"…Orsola, it's the middle of the night. Is this really any time to be running a washing machine?" asked Kanzaki in annoyance, but Orsola merely pointed at the user's manual.

"It says here it is made to run silently so it can be used at night."

"It says something about phons and decibels, but do you really understand what it means? Also, the laundry for today has already been put into storage."

They were in the women's dorm for members of Necessarius. A single pattern or stitch of their clothes could have magical symbolism included. Those clothes could function as either weapons or armor, so they could not simply be tossed

into a laundry basket. A “fight” could break out between the defensive functions of the clothes. The spells used could have compatibility issues between denomination and sect, so it was standard practice to take that into consideration while washing them.

While continuing to carve the chess piece, Sherry spoke up with an annoyed tone of voice.

“The storage has three layers of magical locks protecting it, right? Undoing all that would be bad enough, but relocking it afterwards would be even worse.”

Upon hearing that, Kanzaki’s face lit up and she straightened her back.

“Okay, if we don’t have any laundry, we can’t use the washing machine. We have to be up early tomorrow, so let’s turn out the lights and get to sleep.”

“Oh, but we do have some laundry here,” said Orsola as she immediately started to strip off her habit.

With a shocked look, Kanzaki said, “W-we do not need to make more laundry for no reason! This is setting a bad example for the newcomers. You three, please do not start following Orsola’s example as if that is the custom here!!”

“Now, now. Japan’s yukata is made to be very easily removed. The coloring on the obi is very beautiful.”

“Stop grabbing at my obi and listen to what I’m saying!!”

By the time Kanzaki tried to stop Orsola, the indigo obi wrapped around her waist had already been undone. It then fell to the floor. The front of the yukata opened like a coat with all the buttons undone.

“Oh, dear.” Orsola’s eyes opened wide. “Kanzaki, do you not wear underwear?”

“You don’t wear underwear with a yukata!!”

She hid her body behind hands that held the explosive physical strength of a Saint, so not even Orsola was able to steal the actual yukata from her.

Orsola gave up on that and started gathering other clothes.

“But what am I supposed to wear while I sleep?”

“Sister Agnese, you will just strip down to your underwear when you get sleepy anyway.”

After some discussion of that type, Orsola managed to gather her own clothes, Agnese, Lucia, and Angelene’s habits, and Kanzaki’s obi. She tossed them all into the washing machine, closed the clear lid, and pressed the large “wash” button.

As advertised, water filled the washing machine’s tub, and the laundry began spinning around with movements that created no noticeable vibrations. Instead of the normal drum shape, the tub was a sphere so it could rotate in all 360 degrees. It was an amazing washing machine just to look at.

“Ohh! It really is quiet!”

Orsola let out a cry like a child in front of a roller coaster. Agnese, Angelene, and Lucia watched the washing machine run from over her shoulder. They were treating it the way color televisions were when they were first developed. It was a very strange sight as they were all in their underwear.

“…Did you steal my obi just because you wanted to see this?”

Kanzaki alone was disheartened, but then Sherry suddenly spoke up.

“Hey, you from the Far East sect.”

“I’m currently something like a runaway ninja, but what do you want?”

“Did you actually read the user’s manual?”

“?”

Kanzaki looked over at Sherry. With an annoyed look, the brown woman wearing a double-layer negligee moved the chisel to point at the user’s manual lying on the floor.

“It says to take anything with colors that will run and separate them from the normal clothes. Will your dyed obi be okay in with everything else?”

“Gyaaahhh!!” screamed Kanzaki as she ran over to the washing machine.

That Saint looked like she was about to strike the washing machine head on. The four former Roman Catholic nuns in their underwear tried to stop her with all their might, but Kanzaki Kaori used her tremendous physical ability to slip past them and cling to the washing machine’s control panel.

“St-stop! Where’s the stop button!?”

Kanzaki frantically searched for it, but she knew next to nothing about machines and was panicked on top of that. The button had to be right there, but she could not find it.

Meanwhile, the laundry continued spinning around in the washing machine.

“My!” exclaimed Orsola as she watched the laundry through the clear lid. “I can see the stains coming right off of Kanzaki’s obi!!”

“That’s just the color washing out! Curse you, you vanguard of scientific culture!!”

Kanzaki could stand it no longer, so she half-forced the clear lid open while the washing machine was running.

But it was a cutting edge cubic washing machine tub that rotated in all 360 degrees.

In the blink of an eye, Kanzaki Kaori was covered in a huge amount of water flung due to centrifugal force. She was left dripping wet with see-through clothes.

“W-wow. You really aren’t wearing any underwear…”

As soon as Angelene made that careless comment, the Priestess let out a wail and broke down crying.

Chapter 3: Misaka and Misaka's younger sister.
Sister_and_Sisters.

Part 1

Kamijou Touma sat on a bench in a small plaza (no smoking) used as a meeting spot in the underground mall. He was drinking oolong tea from a small 200 milliliter plastic bottle he had bought at a shop.

He was currently alone.

Shirai Kuroko had been hanging around, but Misaka Mikoto had beat her down enough to get her to teleport off somewhere while shouting “I was only acting out of concern for you, onee-sama! I never thought my kindness would be a double-edged sword!!” Mikoto herself had headed back to the service store to finish the procedure to register their cell phones. Kamijou had actually gone back with her, but he had left partway through. The Ace of Tokiwadai Middle School had shouted “This store gives you a Pyonko along with Gekota!?” and entered a strange mood with her eyes sparkling. Kamijou decided it was for the best not to deal with someone when they were in such an annoying mood.

“…I hope she calms down soon.”

Kamijou sighed and looked down at his cell phone. It was hard to tell while in the underground mall, but it was already past 4 PM. His honest thoughts were nothing more than, “Filling out that application and all that other paperwork sure took a long time.”

And as he relaxed on the bench, Misaka Mikoto returned to him.

“Oh, are you done now?”

Kamijou spoke to her, but Mikoto merely turned her head slightly away without speaking a word. It looked like she was hesitant to reply, but he was unsure what about his question would be difficult to answer.

“?” Kamijou tilted his head in puzzlement. “What? Did something happen? Come to think of it, you don’t have a bag for a new cell phone. Was there some kind of trouble?”

“N-no, Misaka is…” Mikoto waved her hands with smooth, silent motions and then brought a hand to her own forehead. “This Misaka is one of the Misakas that always wears goggles, says Misaka #10032 as she gives her Serial Number to help identify herself.”

“Are you Misaka Imouto?”

Misaka Imouto gave a quick nod in response.

This girl had an identical body to Misaka Mikoto down to every hair on her head, so Kamijou could hardly be blamed for confusing them. She usually had an unrefined pair of night-vision goggles on her forehead, but for some reason she did not today.

Misaka Imouto seemed to be experiencing some kind of special circumstances.

“Did you see a Misaka of about this size? asks Misaka as she holds her hand horizontally just under her chest.”

Misaka Imouto was indicating a height about the same or possibly slightly shorter than Komoe-sensei. Kamijou’s expression grew a bit confused as he watched her.

“You come in different sizes?”

“Misaka will take that as a no, says Misaka as she is disillusioned by your uselessness and continues calculating out that damn brat’s escape route.”

Misaka Imouto let out a slight sigh. She adjusted her grip on her school bag and Kamijou heard some kind of heavy metallic noise come from within.

(She’s in a bad mood again.)

As Kamijou had that thought, she continued speaking.

“To be blunt, Misaka’s goggles were stolen, says Misaka as she reports her situation with a grim expression. Without those goggles, Misaka is difficult to distinguish from the Original, so she must retrieve them as quickly as possible. However, the situation leaves Misaka at a disadvantage, says Misaka as she looks up at you so as to implicitly ask for help.”

“…”

Kamijou realized that both the older sister and the younger sister were very coercive in the same kind of way.

In amazement, he said, “It is true you will probably be mistaken for Mikoto looking like that.”

“Yes, agrees Misaka. When Misaka was running down an alley with a submachine gun in hand, she had some trouble when a pigtailed schoolgirl suddenly yelling out to her, says Misaka as she earnestly tells a tale of her hardship.”

“Um…pigtails you say?”

He had a guess who that might be. He just prayed it would have no negative impact on Mikoto’s everyday life. He also thought he had heard the dangerous term “submachine gun”, so he just hoped he had misheard.

“Y’know, it would be nice if you had something to distinguish you from Mikoto. At least until you get your goggles back.”

“Are you asking Mikoto to become a forehead character? asks Misaka with her head tilted in puzzlement.”

“Delete that term from your mind.” Kamijou seriously wondered who had taught it to her. “There are other options besides the forehead. You’re wearing the same winter uniform, but you could just take off the blazer, I guess.”

“So you enjoy forcing girls to strip in public places? asks Misaka as she obeys despite not understanding what is so great about it.”

“Bh!? Why are you reaching for your skirt all of a sudden!? Okay, okay! Don’t take anything off!! How about you add an accessory to distinguish yourself!?”

“Misaka has no such decorations on hand at the moment and she does not think she could afford to purchase one, says Misaka as she appeals to her family-oriented side by providing a realistic response.”

(I need to ask that frog-faced doctor about Misaka Imouto’s living environment.)

“No, there are tons of options for accessories. It just has to distinguish you from Mikoto, so I’m sure we can find something for only 1000 yen at a small stand around here. And with something that cheap, I’ll even buy it for you.”

“Buy it for Misaka…?”

“But what to get? Would a ring make a good accessory for a girl?”

“…A ring?”

Misaka Imouto fell silent for some reason.

But Kamijou was utterly oblivious.

“No, a ring wouldn’t stand out enough. You want something that is obvious at a glance, so maybe a skull mask or…Ow!?”

The instant he changed his mind, Misaka Imouto expressionlessly punched him.

Part 2

“That damn brat disappeared?”

Accelerator’s voice echoed through the living room.

He had assumed Last Order was napping in the room she had been assigned, but Yomikawa said she was no longer inside the apartment.

Wearing a track suit as always, Yomikawa lightly shook her head and said, “The door to the apartment locks itself just like a hotel, so you don’t need a key to leave. It’s possible she went off somewhere to play.”

“This apartment building is pretty big. She could be playing in the elevator, the stairway, or a hallway,” said Yoshikawa, but Accelerator had a very bad feeling about what this meant.

He could not bring himself to optimistically trust the goodness of the world. He had seen too much evil for that.

(When did I last see that brat?)

Accelerator looked over at the clock on the wall.

It was currently 4:30 PM. When he had eaten lunch, taken a nap, and tried to take a shower, it had been either 1 or 2 PM.

(It’s at least been over 2 hours. With that much time, a pro could have killed her, buried the body, and disappeared without a trace.)

Accelerator and Last Order were both seen as incredibly valuable research material. The experiment they had been involved in had ended, but it would still come as no surprise if someone showed up hoping to make a fortune researching them.

In fact, nothing that calculated or greed-driven was even needed. The mere fact that she was an acquaintance of Accelerator’s could be enough to pinpoint her as a target for attack. Now that he had lost his title as Academy City’s strongest, he was nothing more than another target.

Accelerator clicked his tongue as if he was spitting the sound out and adjusted his grip on the modern cane that was supporting his weight.

“I’m heading out.”

“She’s probably just playing somewhere nearby,” said Yomikawa, sounding horribly carefree. Accelerator gave her an irritated look, but she continued, “After all, she left this on the answering machine.”

"…"

Accelerator fell silent before pressing the play button for the answering machine of the large appliance that was a combination of a phone, a fax machine, and a copier.

After a high pitched beep, he heard, "Um… Misaka is currently being chased by a lower model Misaka, says Misaka as Misaka reports on her situation. Misaka cannot go home right away, but she wants you to make some dinner for her, says Misaka as Misaka makes a request."

Accelerator very nearly beat the phone with his cane, but Yomikawa and Yoshikawa stopped him. Without his powers, he could only struggle in vain.

Accelerator panted with his hair and clothes in disarray.

"…That brat pisses me off to the very bottom of my heart."

"Ah ha ha. That's just how relationships work."

Yomikawa laughed with her arms still wrapped tightly around Accelerator's body for fear he would destroy her phone. This meant she was pressing her large breasts against him, but she did not seem to care.

"There is no such thing as a relationship where everything always goes your way. True freedom where no one ever bothers you is the same as having no one around to notice the things you do." Yomikawa removed her arms from around Accelerator's waist. "That's what happens when you take root. The two of you get so entangled together that it gets hard to move. But it makes you stronger for the rainy days."

"…"

Listening to what the adults had to say was annoying, too.

Whether they were dead on or not, he would rather not be given lessons that he had no idea how to interpret.

At any rate, Accelerator wanted to find Last Order and keep her where he could see her. He was only free to act as he wished while sending and receiving weak

electromagnetic waves via the electrode on his neck, and Last Order was at the center of the Sister's activities. Accelerator still only had a vague idea of how the Misaka Network worked, but he had a feeling any harm to that model could have an effect on him. In his mind, he was acting solely for himself.

Meanwhile, Yomikawa must have been convinced she had said something profound because she had a triumphant look on her face.

"Okay, Kikyou and I will help out."

"I have to help too?"

"If you don't want to, you need to abandon the name Kikyou."

Yoshikawa, who did not look very athletically inclined, was staring out the window while muttering, "If I walk around outside for more than an hour in one day, I'll collapse."

Accelerator frowned and said, "What are you doing?"

"We're going to look for that girl too," said Yomikawa as if it should be obvious.

Accelerator fell silent.

The track suit wearing woman pulled out the USB memory for the answering machine.

"It sounded like she was outside. I should be able to find the location by analyzing the background noises. At any rate, just leave this to Yomikawa of Anti-Skill."

"Aiho, isn't that a misuse of your authority?"

"Finding lost children is one of my duties. I see no problem with this."

(Why does she look so delighted?)

Yomikawa grinned at him with the USB memory in one hand.

"Do you know what this kind of mutual relationship is called?"

“Tripping each other up?”

“Give and take.”

With Yoshikawa’s exasperated correction, the search for Last Order began.

Part 3

Misaka Imouto was acting quite angry.

Kamijou Touma trembled in fear at one side of the underground mall.

He had ended up buying her a cheap necklace that came out to exactly 1000 yen after sales tax, but be had a feeling Misaka Imouto had been frowning ever since. She would occasionally mutter something about a ring for her left ring finger. Kamijou wondered what she could be so troubled about.

“Um, Misaka Imouto?”

“…”

“If you really don’t like the necklace, we can return it.”

“Please do not steal anything else from Misaka, says Misaka in a quiet but earnest voice.”

(So she actually does like the necklace?)

Kamijou was confused because he could not figure out what had Misaka Imouto so troubled. He was a bit worried about Mikoto who had yet to return from the store, so he really did not need Misaka Imouto being in a bad mood on top of it.

Kamijou decided to try to put her into a good mood and looked around.

“Hm? They’re selling sweets over there. How about we get some, Misaka Imouto?”

The fact that he immediately went with food was likely thanks to the influence of the pure white nun named Index. Kamijou hated himself for being so influenced by her.

Meanwhile, Misaka Imouto expressionlessly looked up at his face.

“Are you trying to tempt Misaka with food? asks Misaka bluntly.”

“Uuh…!?”

“But Misaka will respect the fact that you are doing so for Misaka’s sake, says Misaka as she does you a favor.”

Since she seemed to agree, Kamijou headed for the store.

Just like an ice cream shop, the small shop had its register directly facing the underground mall’s passageway. It was selling small sweets in the shapes of animals like chicks and puppies. They looked a bit like takoyaki, but they were likely made from a pancake-like batter and likely had custard cream and similar fillings. They were similar to taiyaki with cheese and custard inside like Western confectioneries.

The metal plate had molds built in for the animal shapes.

A young woman of about college age smiled at Kamijou from behind the counter.

“Are you ready to order?”

“Is the flavor different for the different animals? Do they have different fillings?”

“No, no. If they weren’t all the same, we could not get the data we need.”

“…?”

“Um, people have designs they like unconditionally based on feeling rather than reason, right? If that is explored thoroughly enough, it can be used in the fields of clothing and makeup. This is something like a survey. We record statistics on what animals get chosen.”

Kamijou took a step back and looked at the store's sign.

The sign for the obviously rented store had a university's name clearly written on it.

"Well, there's no harm in it, so whatever. …Now, which one should I get? The chick should be good."

"Okay. That's 54 for the chicks. Thank you."

Kamijou left the store still looking puzzled over whether 54 meant the shape was selling well or not.

The chicks were lined up in a clear package in two rows and five columns for a total of 10. Melted caramel had been poured on top of the yellow pancake-like batter. Two small plastic forks were prepared in place of toothpicks.

"Here, Misaka Imouto. Eat up."

"…"

Kamijou held the entire package out towards her, but Misaka Imouto froze in place while staring at the chicks.

In fact, it looked like she was looking the chicks in the eye.

"Um, Misaka Imouto…?"

"…"

Misaka Imouto gave no response to Kamijou's words.

With no change of expression, she began giving small clicks of her tongue.

(Come to think of it, Misaka Imouto has less experience with the world than someone who lost his memories like me. Maybe she doesn't know how to eat them.)

Misaka Imouto was poking at one of the chick's beaks with a slender finger while saying "Mh, what a well-behaved chick you are to not bite Misaka, says Misaka as she sighs in admiration."

Kamijou gently grabbed one of the plastic forks.

He then stabbed the fork into one of the chick's backs in order to lecture Misaka Imouto in how to eat them.

Misaka Imouto's shoulders gave a large jump.

"Th-the chick's round body!? shouts Misaka as she trembles in fear… Why is it so obedient? asks Misaka because the chick is not even crying out."

"Hm? What's with you, Misaka Imouto? If you aren't going to eat it, I will."

"E-eat it…!?"

While Misaka Imouto grew somehow uneasy, Kamijou popped the chick into his mouth with a puzzled look. As he chewed it, the sweetness of a Western confectionery filled his mouth.

"Oh, this thing's pretty good for being part of an experiment."

Meanwhile, Misaka Imouto felt a great shock over the fact that the chick's cute round eyes (made of chocolate) stared her directly in the eye as it was tossed into the boy's mouth.

"……You ate it."

It was audibly chewed to pieces with a look on its face as if it was trying to say something.

Misaka Imouto began to tremble.

"Even if they are part of an experiment, Misaka cannot let you take these chicks' lives!!!!!!!!!!"

"Mgh!? Wh-why are you sparking like crazy all of a-…!?"

Before Kamijou could finish shouting, bluish-white sparks flew from Misaka Imouto's entire body.

She was a part of Radio Noise.

Even with 20,000 of her, her power was no match for that of the Railgun.

But she could not be taken lightly.

1/20,000 of a billion volts was still 50,000 volts.

“Bwahh!?”

Kamijou had the misfortune of holding a fork in his left hand and the package of chicks in his right hand. The 50,000 volts struck him while he could not use either hand.

Even with Imagine Breaker, there was nothing he could do.

The unexpected attack sent Kamijou rolling across the floor of the underground mall.

The students coming and going through the passageway shouted out or cautiously whispered things like “Did you just see something spark!?”

“Ah!? says Misaka as she comes back to her senses at the sight of the scattered chicks!!”

Since it was the chicks and not Kamijou that brought her back to her senses, she must have really been stuck on them.

Misaka Imouto picked up the flipped over package and diligently put the chicks back to normal.

Her expression could not have been more serious.

Meanwhile, Kamijou unsteadily stood up from where he had fallen.

“U-ugh. Sorry, Misaka Imouto…”

Since he had apologized, Misaka Imouto turned an ear toward him while holding the package of chicks.

Kamijou Touma said, “I ruined the food. But thanks to the 3 second rule, I’m still willing to eat them.”

As soon as he finished speaking, Kamijou was sent flying by a kick from Misaka Imouto.

Misaka Imouto let out some rare heavy breathing and Kamijou was completely unable to grasp what she was thinking. He guessed she must have just been really, really hungry.

And as Kamijou's head was filled with question marks, another familiar face approached him.

"Wait…What are you two doing!?"

It was seeing Misaka Imouto and not Kamijou that caused Misaka Mikoto to frantically dash over. In addition to her school bag, she also held a small paper bag with the phone company's logo on it. She had not actually gotten a new phone, so it must have held paperwork, the case for the expansion chip, and the mascot strap. Convenience stores and supermarkets were moving in the direction of not wasting bags for small items, but that trend seemed to have not yet reached that service store.

"But…"

Misaka Mikoto and Misaka Imouto.

The two of them truly could not be told apart. However, twins were not all that rare, so the Tokiwadai brand name may have been the reason they were drawing attention from passersby. Mikoto and Misaka Imouto were identical, but Kamijou could now tell them apart thanks to the necklace hanging from Misaka Imouto's neck. He was glad the plan had worked.

Misaka Imouto replied to Mikoto's question, "Misaka was forced to take a long detour through this underground mall in order to retrieve her stolen goggles, replies Misaka while her attention is stolen by the Original's frog mascots. Misaka has estimated Serial Number 20001's escape route and has compiled a list of firearms she can use in the counterattack, but none of it matters when compared to the frogs, says Misaka in an offhand matter."

"Stop that and explain yourself properly!!"

When Mikoto angrily put Gekota and Pyonko away in her school bag, Misaka

Imouto's expression remained unchanged but a somehow sorrowful look appeared in her eyes. Her gaze then dropped to the package of chicks in her hands.

"…*This* Misaka will not be unfaithful, says Misaka as she double-checks on the chicks."

"What do you mean 'this Misaka'?" said Mikoto in annoyance, but it seemed she was a bit interested in the design of the chicks Misaka Imouto was holding.

However, Misaka Imouto used both hands to hold the chicks up against her chest.

"Original, you are already infatuated with those frogs, so you do not need these, says Misaka as she puts up iron defenses that she will keep up until she is in her grave."

"Mh. C'mon, you can let me see those chicks a little, right?"

"Misaka said you could not and she means it, says Misaka as she sticks to her guns. If you want them so badly, you should have him buy you some like Misaka did, says Misaka as she indicates who she means with her chin."

Mikoto turned toward Kamijou.

"…"

She remained silent for a while but finally took a deep breath and spoke.

"…Because you lost that punishment game, you have to do whatever I tell you, right?"

"Wait, what?"

"You have to stick with me all day today as if you are my personal device. So you will work your ass off to carry out all of my requests, right?"

"Why!? Why is the air around you ominously growing electrified!?"

"Because you are acting no different from normal!! You're in the middle of

carrying out your punishment for me, and you're just calling out to whoever you like. Do you really like the idea of a little sister that much, you idiotttttt!?"

A billion volts roared out of her bangs, but Kamijou deflected it with a swing of his right fist. The pattern repeated two or three times before…

"Dahhh! I can't stand this!? Why do you have so much endurance!? Why can't you just let yourself get hit and knocked to the ground!?"

"Why are you so mad!? And if I complied with that request, I would die!!"

After ten or twenty more shots, Mikoto seemed to finally decide it was pointless and stopped the rain of lightning spears while panting with her shoulders moving up and down. Kamijou was just about to collapse to the ground, the underground mall was filling with comments of "Should we call Anti-Skill?" and "No, I don't want to get involved in this.", and Misaka Imouto was using her index finger to poke at the beaks of the confectionery chicks.

Misaka Imouto suddenly looked up from the chicks and said, "By the way, what are you doing here, Original? asks Misaka as she begins to gather information."

"Uuh…!?"

Mikoto's shoulders gave a large jump.

She was not doing anything particularly wrong, but she still averted her gaze from Misaka Imouto.

"W-well, we challenged each other to a punishment game during the Daihaseisai and I won. I was just dragging this idiot around for his punishment. Um, I guess I would have to go back to what happened during the Daihaseisai for a more thorough explanation."

"In other words, you are not being honest, says Misaka as she begins analyzing the information."

"Bh!? What information and what method of analysis led to that conclusion!? I-I'm being perfectly honest about everything here. I don't see what you could possibly think I'm being dishonest about! And what exactly are you saying would happen if I 'was honest' with this complete idiot!?"

Mikoto stabbed a finger in Kamijou’s direction, but Misaka Imouto remained expressionless.

“Mh. Misaka does not understand how you can treat him so rudely, rebuts Misaka. He saved Misaka’s life, so he deserves better than that, says Misaka as she smoothly asks for a correction.”

“Uuh… B-but that has nothing to do with this situation. What’s wrong with calling an idiot an idiot?”

“Oh, so you are stubbornly refusing to be honest? asks Misaka as a final check.” Misaka Imouto peered into Mikoto’s eyes. “Then this Misaka will be honest, says Misaka as she heads down a different path from the Original.”

As soon as she said that, Misaka Imouto moved next to Kamijou and suddenly embraced his right arm.

Her flat chest pressed up against his elbow.

“Dwah!?”

Kamijou’s heart pounded in his chest.

The sudden shock gave that pure boy trouble breathing and his panic kept him from noticing Mikoto silently flapping her mouth open and closed in front of him. The male students in the area were glancing over toward them occasionally, but he did not notice that either.

“Wh-wh-wha…”

As Mikoto watched on in astonishment, Misaka Imouto brought her body in closer as if to rub up against Kamijou’s body while still clinging to his right arm.

“Look, says Misaka as she casually shows off the accessory she had him buy her.”

“!?”

An odd snapping sound came from Mikoto’s head.

Misaka Imouto was about to say more, but…

They heard the sound of small footsteps, and then…

“Misaka will embrace him from the opposite side, says Misaka as Misaka decides to join in because it looks fun!! Yay!!”

Now a girl of about 10 grabbed on and hung on to Kamijou’s left arm.

Kamijou looked over in shock and saw a girl who had the exact same face as Mikoto just with a younger body. She was wearing the same goggles Misaka Imouto normally wore, but the elastic band was too loose so it was hanging around her neck rather than on her forehead.

“Who are you!? The little sister’s little sister!?”

Kamijou asked about her identity while growing even more flustered at the feeling that went beyond flat and just felt hard.

But before the little girl could respond…

“Serial Number 20001, you have some guts to appear before Misaka so casually, says Misaka as she enters serious mode.”

“Heh heh heh. Misaka has grown tired of that game, says Misaka as Misaka heads off to discover some new entertainment.”

“Do you really think Misaka will let you escape!? exclaims Misaka as she pulls her submachine gun from her bag.”

A dull metallic noise rang out, Mikoto practically did a spit take, and the little girl disappeared into the crowd at high speed.

“If you treat them rudely, Misaka will kill you, warns Misaka.”

After whispering that into Kamijou’s ear, Misaka Imouto gently handed him the chicks. She then charged into the crowd while carrying a gun that in no way looked like a toy.

He heard voices coming from beyond the wall.

“How can you call that being serious!? says Misaka as Misaka mocks you.”

“Misaka has yet to even begin, says Misaka as she makes the final expansion to Misaka Full Boost!!”

Strange metallic noises continued to come from further into the crowd as if something was being assembled. Kamijou kind of wanted to take a peek at what was happening, but he was too afraid to approach.

Part 4

At 5 PM, Accelerator left the air-conditioned apartment and placed his cane on the asphalt. He held a cell phone in his other hand.

He was heading out to find Last Order who had not returned home no matter how long they waited.

It seemed all of Academy City had only a half day of classes, but by this time of day it was indistinguishable from a normal weekday. The students walking around were wearing sailor uniforms or collared jackets in order to grow accustomed to their brand new winter uniforms. The only real difference from normal was the distinctive smell of new clothes floating in the air.

“What annoying weather…” muttered Accelerator as he glanced up into the sky.

He had not noticed from within the apartment, but the blue sky had at some point grown covered by gray…or rather, almost black clouds. The sky looked like it could begin raining at any moment. Since the Academy City supercomputer named Tree Diagram that had been used for managing the weather forecast had been destroyed, sudden changes in the weather such as evening showers could no longer be predicted accurately.

“Oh, dear. I hope we find her before it starts pouring,” said Yomikawa over the phone while she was probably looking up at the sky as well.

Yoshikawa had been left alone in the apartment. It was possible Last Order would return while they were out looking, but she would be stuck standing in front of the main entrance as she did not have a key or the passcode.

Accelerator clicked his tongue.

He did not care if she just stood there, but that child had a habit of running off somewhere when she was bored, so he highly doubted she would actually stay put. They were afraid of her getting fed up of waiting and leaving which would only make their search harder.

Accelerator adjusted his grip on the cell phone and said, “I thought you were in your car?”

“I’ll still get wet in the time it takes me to hold up the umbrella after opening the door.”

Accelerator almost called her pathetic, but he held his tongue. He was the one whose body had grown white from avoiding the ultraviolet rays of sunlight.

“So do you have a general idea where that brat is?” he asked instead.

“I picked up on what sounded like the background music played in the underground mall near here.”

“Ah? Did you use your analysis equipment just to look for a lost child?”

“Like I said before, finding a lost child is part of my job. Now then. I just had to analyze the music playing in the background of her phone call to determine her location.”

“Hmph. Are you talking about that sound no one hears that plays all over the city?”

“Oh? So someone actually noticed. Technically, it’s a wave with a frequency lower than the audible range for humans.”

“You idiots,” spat out Accelerator.

He was an esper with the power to observe, calculate, and control every type of vector. If he missed the vectors he could not see or hear, he would never be able to defend against things like radiation.

“You secretly mix that sound in with the store music and anything else coming from any speakers, don’t you?”

“That’s right,” affirmed Yomikawa. “But just adding in a low frequency wave would be meaningless. It only becomes a proper sound once a special frequency Anti-Skill has is used alongside it. Each individual speaker is made so we detect a different sound from it, so we can get a general idea where a phone call was made. These days, devices that prevent a phone trace are so easy to get a hold of that we have to go to all this extra effort. Of course, this is just one method of searching. We usually gather information from a variety of sources using a few different methods.”

“What a pain in the ass,” sighed Accelerator.

Only Academy City could easily pull off such a rough setup. They could solve countless problems from the alterations to the systems to the deployment of the equipment by saying it was “for an experiment”.

“So I just have to head to that underground mall, right?” asked Accelerator.

“For now. I doubt that quick little thing will stay in one place for long, so you might have to start asking around.”

“…Me? Looking like this?”

“Just smile! C’mon, start practicing your smile.”

“Idiot,” said Accelerator with a click of his tongue.

At any rate, he was too well known and not in a good way. If that Level 5 approached someone with a smile, they might die of shock. He would completely understand if the person pulled out a gun and shot him because they assumed he was coming to murder them. Simply put, there would be nothing they could do if he was. And so they would choose to fight back in any way they could.

But if he was to search for Last Order, he needed to gather information.

“This is going to get annoying,” muttered Accelerator.

And then Yomikawa suddenly spoke up.

“Hey, Accelerator.”

“What?”

“Are you that afraid of showing good will to others?”

“…You really like these cheerful topics, don’t you? It’s perfect for an afterschool walk.”

“Is it easy being a tyrant?”

Yomikawa was not listening.

Or rather, she was ignoring what he said.

“It may cause a lot of trouble with people, but I suppose it does have its perks,” she said. “A tyrant will never be betrayed. He never has to worry about a friendship dying. He never has to fear that his good will could be rejected. After all, he is nothing but a target of fear and hatred.”

Her words smoothly continued.

Accelerator merely listened.

“I am not saying that human relationships are made entirely out of good will and ill will. But it is true that you have pushed back everything that came before you with rejection and ill will. It was easier that way. But that will change. That is why I am asking. Are you that afraid to choose whether you will show good will or ill will?”

“What a load of shit. I-…”

“It’s the truth,” said Yomikawa, cutting off Accelerator’s words. “You are willing to accept good will from Last Order, but you are afraid to show good will to her. Your relationship looks good at first glance, but it is actually in a very precarious situation. If that good will from Last Order ever runs out, there will be nothing left to hold it together.”

Her tone was flat.

The fact that she saw no need to emphasis anything made it feel all the more true.

“Are you afraid, Accelerator? Afraid to do anything that would push her any further away from you because you do not know how to bring her closer. Afraid that your actions will backfire and push her so far away that you can never bring her back. But nothing will ever happen if you do nothing.”

“Are you lecturing me?”

“I am well aware I’m not the best person for this, but I am a teacher. *Although I doubt a lowly Anti-Skill member like me would ever have a chance to learn of your true darkness*.”

“True,” said Accelerator, now understanding what she we getting at.

She had probably already searched the Bank for information on him.

She was now asking him directly because that had gotten her nowhere.

“You sure do things in a roundabout way,” he commented.

“Just the name of the place you used to be was enough to tell me that.”

“The Special Esper Institute?”

Accelerator easily spoke the name Yomikawa hesitated to voice.

That institute’s name was recorded…or rather, sealed in an especially strict region of the Bank.

“Its official name is the Special Esper Dual Modification Technology Research Institute. I was forced to live in that school until I was 9. That hell was rumored to have a facility for disposing of corpses on the grounds.”

It was only in Academy City that two mismatched ideas like that of a school and the disposing of corpses would be brought together like that. In that city, schools also functioned as research and testing institutions for psychic powers development. When rumors branched off, the schools could become known as murderous institutions that performed inhuman research.

“But the place was even worse than the rumors suggested. They didn’t dispose of corpses there. It was the opposite. It was a garbage dump for the disposal of living human beings. I’m sure you’ve at least heard the stories.”

“…Yes, I have.”

The Special Esper Institute had focused on experiments and research into Dual Skills. Currently, it had been concluded that students could only use a single power each and that the appearance of two or more powers at once was impossible. Most of the data used to reach that conclusion had been gathered at that institute.

In other words, a long string of failures had led to the discovery of that law.

Psychic powers were developed by directly affecting the structure of the brain using suggestion and drugs. It was best not to imagine what sort of tragedies were created when that failed. Contemplating on that too much could lead you to realize the truth behind the seemingly ridiculous phrase of “a fate worse than death”.

Yomikawa said, “It was my unit that raided and broke up that institution.”

“Thanks, I guess.”

“Towards the end, the Special Esper Institute had to have realized that an esper could only have a single power. Yet they still desired a completed Dual Skill for their own fame, so they sacrificed more and more children. They especially liked to use **Child Errors**.”

A Child Error was one social phenomenon unique to Academy City.

As a general rule, every student in Academy City lived in a dormitory with a few exceptions that freeloaded in a bakery or something similar. However, in some rare cases, someone would use Academy City to abandon a child. They would pay the entry fee and then disappear once the child had entered the dorm. It was better than stuffing an infant in a coin locker, but it was the same basic idea.

Academy City had developed a system for caring for those children.

But some parasitic research teams would use that to their own advantage. **Produce**, the **Dark May Project**, and experiments in **inducing runaway powers to analyze the laws behind them**. Those types of experiments were not permitted by the leadership of Academy City, but they were carried out regardless using the Child Errors.

“…I saw it there. I saw what became of the children taken beyond those heavy doors,” said Yomikawa in a heavy voice.

When he heard that, Accelerator laughed.

He laughed at that naïve thinking of a normal person that led her to believe *that was as deep as the hell went.*

Her lack of imagination was proof that Yomikawa Aiho was a resident of a

wholesome world.

Unlike Accelerator, who laughed because he knew how deep it all went.

“But unfortunately, I didn’t get to see your heroic actions. As I said before, I was only in the Special Esper Institute until I was 9. I was moved elsewhere then. Do you know why?” The corners of Accelerator’s mouth twisted up. “*Because they couldn’t handle me.* Even that hell found my power to be too much. Even those demons in lab coats were afraid of me. That’s just the kind of monster I am.” The white student spoke into his cell phone. “And it was no different afterwards. It was all such nonsense. Imaginary Number Institute, the Wisdom Institute, a Kirigaoka affiliate… Well, tragedies are surprisingly *soft*. That is how I managed to slip through. And when I slipped through, I just sank further. Deeper and deeper.”

Accelerator tapped his cane against the ground.

The bottom clacked against the asphalt as if he had spit on the ground.

“I never stayed in the same place for 2 months straight. And during the course of it all, I was reminded just how much of a monster I am. They were demons themselves, so what did that make me when they were all afraid of me?”

And as that monster bounced from place to place with no one able to handle him, he had eventually reached the Level 6 research institution Yoshikawa had belonged to. He had been received exceptionally well there and thus stayed for more than 2 months. But that had only been another face of their fear of Accelerator. The looks on their faces plainly said they were trying not to anger him. The only exception had been that naïve Yoshikawa.

And even after ultimately slaughtering over 10,000 people, the researchers had still treated him the same.

The sense of distance between them had seemed as if it would never melt away.

Fear.

A whiteness that was rejected by the darkness.

In the end, that had been what Accelerator was.

“It’s impossible for me to show anyone good will. It’s futile. What good is it to pay back a single yen on a one hundred million yen debt? I have no intention of paying out any good will if it will just be crushed under nothing but the interest. It’s ridiculous to even think about a joyous day when I’ve finished paying back it all. It gives me chills.”

His words were pathetic.

Accelerator cursed to himself that he should not be boasting about how much debt he had.

Yomikawa remained silent for a while.

But then she spoke.

“This may be simplifying things a bit, but you hate that you have completely forgotten about paying it back, don’t you? If you had a way to pay back that hundred million debt, you would jump at it. Am I wrong?”

“…Hmph.”

Accelerator did not give a proper reply.

Yomikawa’s tone of voice did not change. She remained serious.

“For example, I do not aim a weapon at children. Even if I am up against an esper, I will never aim a weapon at them. That is my own personal rule that I hold myself to.”

“What?”

“*Why do you think I hold myself to that rule?*”

“…”

“*Do you know why I would hesitate to aim a weapon at a child*?”

“You…” muttered Accelerator under his breath.

The scent of dark feelings leaking from her voice brought the image of a back alley to his mind.

“That’s right. The amount of my debt may be trivial compared to yours, but it is still the same sort of debt. And that means we must do the same sort of thing even if you must do it on a larger scale, right?” Yomikawa’s voice stabbed into Accelerator. “No matter how pathetic it may seem, we can only pay it back one yen, or even less than a yen, at a time. As it accumulates, it will surely open the path before you. And you have powers I do not have. There may be plenty of ways for you to pay it all back at once.”

“What a laughable idea. It’s brings such a smile to my face, I think it’s going to distort it into something horrible.”

“The easiest method might be to join Judgment. Just having your name in their ranks could be enough to make Academy City 30% more peaceful than it is now. I could prepare the paperwork if you want.”

“That isn’t happening,” said Accelerator in rejection.

His was not that sort of power. His power was the type that would gain him nothing more than the splattered blood of his enemies. His power was worse than nuclear power. It was a wholly negative power that had no possible way to be used peacefully. He could try all he wanted, but it would never lead to success. His actions would produce nothing but destruction.

But…

He may have wondered “what if” at times.

What if he had used his power to stop that experiment?

What if he had used his power to stop those Sisters from heading down the path of death?

And…

What if it was still not too late?

How many of the deaths scattered before him and that would be scattered before him in the future could be prevented?

But that was all nothing more than empty theories that could not be realized.

There was no way he could do it.

He knew there was no way he could do it.

No one had needed to tell him that. As the one who had been using his powers for so long, he knew it better than anyone.

And yet…

“That’s all bullshit.”

“But if you gather enough of that ‘bullshit’, you can pay back your debt,” said Yomikawa Aiho.

She spoke with the voice of one who stood in the sunlight.

Between the lines 3

Kazakiri Hyouka walked through Academy City.

She was a plain girl. Her long hair that reached her waist was its natural color. That was the nice way of putting it, but it basically meant she had done nothing to treat it. She only had a tuft split off to the side of her head with a rubber band. Her well-featured face was hidden by large unfashionable glasses and she wore no makeup. And on top of all that, her skirt extended past her knees. All told, this was no way to look in the shopping district.

But she still drew people’s attention.

Instead of drawing attention due to being a beauty with an excellent body, it was due to an unnatural phenomenon.

Static.

This girl had the atmosphere of a small flower blooming unnoticed, but her outline would occasionally distort. With the horrible screeching of static, her

silhouette would collapse like mist being blown in the wind or like a television with poor reception and then it would revert to normal. One second it looked like her summer dress shirt was wavering and in the next it was covered by a blue blazer.

She walked through the streets like this.

The sight would normally have caused a large commotion, but it did nothing but "draw the attention" of those around her.

That was because she was within a city of psychic powers and advanced technology.

Most unnatural situations would be accepted rather than rejected.

But…

"Hey, who is that?" said an Anti-Skill man who ran over to Kazakiri.

Anti-Skill members were experts that would use even guns to resolve any criminal incidents, but they were teachers first and foremost. As such, that man did not have the sharp senses of an agent.

That Anti-Skill man accepted her as a normal part of the cityscape.

And so he was not trying to eliminate her.

But…

"Honestly, *who's projecting a 3D image here?* There must be an esper doing this from somewhere nearby. This is quite an elaborate prank."

He was not looking at Kazakiri.

She was accepted as a normal part of the cityscape, but only as a phenomenon.

Psychic powers and advanced technology.

Most unnatural phenomena in that city were explained away using those terms. In Academy City, people could accept anything by assuming it was created by some experimental technology.

And so Kazakiri Hyouka was able to walk through the city.

That self-proclaimed “monster” that no one would think was human was accepted without issue.

Was this fortune?

Or was it misfortune?

Kazakiri was accepted as a staticky 3D image created by an esper and not as a human being with a mind of her own.

She gave a slight smile.

It was a smile mixed with a bit of bitterness and loneliness.

It was a horribly fleeting expression that could only be described as “human”.

“…This is quite a detailed image. Are you trying to make your teacher blush?”

That expression was also accepted.

Except for the most important part.

Chapter 4: Two Pairs Gently Cross Paths.
Boy_Meets_Girl(X2).

Part 1

Misaka Mikoto had gone off somewhere.

Kamijou was not sure why, but she had suddenly fallen into a very bad mood from the moment she had seen Misaka Imouto and that smaller version of her.

“Wait just a second. Have you forgotten whose orders you’re here on!? I thought you were supposed to do whatever I told you today for that punishment game!” she had said while blushing.

Kamijou had simply replied, “Eh? I thought you just wanted that Gekota?”

For some reason, that had caused Mikoto to bite her lip a bit.

“…!! Wha-…Ah…Uuh…That’s right! I don’t need you anymore now that I have Gekota and Pyonko! Enough of this punishment game nonsense, you idiot!!”

That shout had been accompanied by a lightning spear, so Kamijou was currently lying collapsed in a corner of the underground mall. He had succeeded in deflecting the billion volt strike with his right hand, but it had surprised him so much that he had fallen over backwards afterwards.

(Wh-what did I do wrong…?)

Mikoto had shouted “I’ve had enough of you!!” and ran off somewhere, so Kamijou was left alone feeling exhausted and not entirely sure if he had truly been released from his punishment.

(First Shirai Kuroko and now Misaka Imouto. What is with today?)

Kamijou tilted his head in confusion.

The most suspicious individual had been that girl of about 10 who had been with Misaka Imouto. Her facial features had been identical to Mikoto…or rather, to Misaka Imouto, but who had she been?

(I sure hope an additional series of 20,000 Misakas wasn't made…)

That thought gave Kamijou a bit of a cold sweat, but the worst part was that it would not surprise him at all given what he knew of the city.

He sighed and said, "Ugh. I guess I'll ask Misaka Imouto later. I get the feeling ignoring that now will come back to really bite me in the ass later."

"Why are your shoulders drooping so exhaustedly? asks Misaka as Misaka clings to your back like a comforting mascot."

Just as Kamijou received an odd reply when he absentmindedly spoke his thoughts aloud, he felt some weight added to his back. All of Kamijou's hair stood on end at the round feeling on his back.

"Wh-what!? Are you a Konaki Jijii!?"

"Misaka is female and bringing up the occult in Academy City is absurd, says Misaka as Misaka presses her body up against you even more for stability. Misaka wants to make this her home base, says Misaka as Misaka informs you of her wish."

The warm mass of body heat increased in weight a bit.

The trembling feeling in Kamijou's back reached its climax.

"Wahhh!! What the hell is this!?"

As he shouted, he brought his hands behind his head, grabbed hold of the thing clinging to his back, and dragged it in front of his face like he was performing a slam dunk. What he found hanging upside down in front of him was that mysterious tiny Misaka Imouto.

(Who is this girl?)

Kamijou tilted his head in puzzlement.

The upside down girl mimicked his mannerism and tilted her head as well.

Part 2

(How the hell did things end up like this?)

Accelerator's shoulders drooped.

He was at the area just inside the entrance to the underground mall. Specifically, he was in an open space filled with a few tables outside of a fast food restaurant. But since it was inside an underground mall, he felt there was not much difference between inside the restaurant and outside.

A girl wearing a white nun's habit and with silver hair and green eyes had her upper body lying across one of those tables. She was buried in a large number of hamburgers, French fries, salads, and other foods. All of this had been purchased by Accelerator. The girl had not had any money at all.

It had all begun when Accelerator had brought his modern cane into the underground mall to search for Last Order. In that first instant, this mystery girl had run right into him from the side.

With an unsteady footing and voice, the girl had spoken to Accelerator.

"Oh, you're not Touma. You're not Touma at all. I thought you were Touma. Why aren't you Touma? Where did Touma go? It doesn't matter. I'm too hungry to move. It smells like salt, pepper, and meat here. I want to eat it. I want to eat that. What do I have to do? What do I have to do to eat that?"

"…"

Normally, Accelerator would have considered smashing the girl's body to pieces

and tossing her aside, but unfortunately for him, Yomikawa had told him just a few minutes before to try to do something good every once in a while. He really hated that kind of conversation. He had no real intention of faithfully taking Yomikawa's lesson to heart, but he had a feeling he would hear something with a similar nuance to "You didn't even last half an hour after saying you would quit smoking? Ah ha ha!" if he knocked that girl out of his way to continue on.

He was also reminded a bit of that brat by how the girl continued speaking without listening to what anyone was saying, but he would rather die than admit that affected him.

When he then kicked the starving nun into the nearby fast food restaurant and threw his wallet at her, she had uttered the ridiculous line "I want to eat this and that…I want to eat everything here!" That was how he had ended up in the current situation.

Accelerator had allowed his body to be used in many different projects in the past. All the money had simply been thrown into his bank account without being used, so this was not an issue from a monetary perspective. But he had to wonder what that nun's limit was given how many hamburgers she was devouring in quick succession.

The nun was also holding a calico cat, but it must not have been hungry because it showed no interest in the hamburgers. (Not that it could have had them regardless thanks to the finely chopped onions on them.) The cat was meowing back and forth with a stray cat that had wandered into the underground mall. Their conversation was probably something along the lines of "I here supple muscles are in this fall." "No way! I've been focusing on sharpening my claws!!" It seemed neither cat intended to declare the area was its turf.

Accelerator watched the scene of gluttony before him and muttered, "This is ridiculous… Not even dealing with that damn brat is this exhausting."

"Mgh?"

"You don't have to stop at every little thing. Just eat it all. But isn't there something you should be saying to me?"

"Gulp. Yeah, thanks."

"…That's it?"

(What a person to run into.)

Accelerator gently shook his head. He wished better luck in the next life for the people who had to deal with her day in and day out.

The nun brought the large-size drink bottles lined up on the table to her mouth and downed the small plastic bottle's amount of liquid from each one in 5 seconds each.

"Um, my name is Index."

"Can you even taste that?"

“I was looking for Touma, but I got too hungry before I found him. Then again, I was only trying to find him because I was hungry.”

Index tossed the small pieces of ice from one of the drink bottles into her mouth and her shoulder’s shivered a bit. Whether it was a sign of innocence or a ravenous appetite, she did not seem to notice the sauce around her mouth. The way she was full of demerits reminded Accelerator of Last Order.

“…Tch.”

Accelerator clicked his tongue, pulled out a package of pocket tissues, and wordlessly tossed them at Index’s face. He sighed when he saw her struggling to get a tissue out of the plastic packaging. He could not believe how much knowledge of the modern world she lacked.

(So she’s looking for someone too…)

The face of that suspicious figure who had not long ago been wandering around in nothing but a single blanket floated up in Accelerator’s mind. He switched on his cell phone, accessed a picture of Last Order’s face (She had swiped the phone from him when he had mentioned it had a camera. The picture was out of focus and filled with nothing but her face.), and showed it to Index.

“Have you seen this brat?”

“No,” she replied immediately. But she was oddly filled with confidence so it did not seem she was just saying that because she did not care. “I never forget a face I see even once, so I know for sure.”

“Ahn?”

Accelerator frowned, but Index must have been satisfied after eating so many hamburgers because no further explanation seemed forthcoming. She simply sprawled her upper body across the table with a happy expression on her face.

“I really am glad, though. I’ll say it again: thank you. Now I can go look for Touma without worrying about an empty stomach. Now that I’m full, I suppose I actually have less reason to find him, but I won’t be satisfied until I finish what I started.”

“I see. Well, don’t expect any help from me.”

“I’ve been here for a while now, but I still don’t really get this city. And yet I know I will never forget what paths I go down. Maybe just memorizing it isn’t enough. But I don’t care as long as I can meet the people of Academy City.”

“Great, now go away.”

“…What are you doing? Are you busy?”

“Unfortunately, I’m very busy.”

Accelerator pressed down on his cane to stand up from the chair.

In an unfortunate coincidence, he was looking for someone too.

Part 3

“In other words, you’re something like a host computer that binds together Misaka Imouto and all the others?” asked Kamijou with his eyes opened wide.

Having finished her explanation, Last Order (“Another fake-sounding name…”) thought Kamijou, but he kept his mouth shut, swung her small arms around.

“Misaka would say she is more of a console than a host, says Misaka as Misaka corrects you. There is no central Misaka, so there is little point in having a specific unit to act as the ‘core’ of the network, lectures Misaka as Misaka proudly puffs her chest out.”

It seemed she had been created to allow other humans to stop the Sisters if they went on a rampage. A non-member of the network the Sisters created could use her to send a “Last Order” to the network.

That alone made her sound somehow amazing (although none if it felt real to Kamijou), but Kamijou was left wondering what she was doing wasting time around here.

“Um…Misaka came to thank you for when you saved her from the experiment, says Misaka as Misaka suggests this is a Tsuru no Ongaeshi-like turn of events.”

“You say that, but what’s the real reason.”

“You aren’t going to believe Misaka even for an instant!? cries Misaka as Misaka begins stamping her feet!! But yes, it is just a coincidence that Misaka found you here to thank, says Misaka as Misaka reveals the truth!”

“Then my mistrust was justified.”

“Your lack of delicacy really ticks Misaka off! says Misaka as Misaka begins beating you lightly with both hands!!”

It seemed he had angered her.

As he had no other choice, Kamijou looked around and said, “Sorry, sorry, sorry. I’ll buy you some popcorn over there, so will you forgive me?”

“Do you really think a girl’s sensitive heart can be manipulated by food!? says Misaka as Misaka is completely taken aback!!”

(Oh?)

It seemed his methods for dealing with Index had sunk in deeper than he had thought.

(I need to be more careful.)

“Sorry. Then we’ll go without food.”

“Misaka never said she wouldn’t eat it! Misaka would love some popcorn! says Misaka as Misaka shows off a new technique by eating the popcorn but still being angry!!”

(Which is it?)

Kamijou was getting fed up with her, but with the way Last Order was tugging on his pants, it seemed he could settle it with food after all.

Kamijou bought a cylindrical bucket of popcorn with a sweet caramel flavor

added. He pushed it into Last Order's small arms.

"Oh! It's as big as Misaka's head, says Misaka as Misaka is impressed by its economical size."

"…Whoops. That has to be bigger than your stomach."

(Then again, that nun could probably finish off an entire killer whale without trouble, so maybe it isn't that big an issue.)

Two minutes later, Kamijou was watching a little girl tremble horribly with the giant popcorn container in one hand and the other hand held up to her mouth.

Kamijou could not stand just watching on any longer, so he placed a hand on Last Order's slender shoulder.

"You don't have to eat it all."

"Myi…Misaka is not the kind of moron that wastes food she was given…burp."

Her previous businesslike manner of speaking was completely gone. And Kamijou was feeling it may have been wrong to give her such sweet popcorn with nothing to drink.

(Hmm. If only it was this easy to put the normal Misaka in a good mood… Maybe I should have chased after her.)

As Kamijou thought, Last Order started to ask for a drink.

Kamijou had no choice but to buy a small plastic bottle of mineral water. After quenching her thirst with that, Last Order was finally back to her normal self.

She said, "Misaka swiped this, says Misaka as Misaka shows off her prize."

"So you're a bandit now? Not bad, higher model Misaka…wait…huh? Are those goggles? Aren't these the ones Misaka Imouto and the others normally wear?"

Last Order was pointing at the goggles hanging from her neck. The heavy-looking military device looked like night vision goggles. They must have been what had been stolen from Misaka Imouto.

“These were not made for Misaka, so she can’t get them on properly, says Misaka as Misaka gets a bit downhearted.”

“What? Don’t you just have to adjust the length of the strap that holds the goggles on?”

“?”

“Let me see them,” said Kamijou.

Last Order stood right in front of him, raised her jaw slightly, and stood on her tiptoes. She was simply trying to make it easier to reach the goggles hanging from her neck. It was wrong to read any deeper meaning into the action.

He touched the strap and found it was made of rubber. It was similar to the strap that holds swimming goggles on. A metal device at the base of the goggles allowed the length to be adjusted.

“Excuse me for a moment,” said Kamijou as he grabbed the goggles. He figured it would be easiest to bring the metal device to him. Kamijou pulled on the thick rubber strap and it stretched.

Last Order started struggling.

“Ow ow ow ow ow, says Misaka as Misa-…”

“Wah!?”

Kamijou let go of the goggles in surprise.

The stretched rubber strap returned to its original size.

A great snapping noise came from Last Order’s face.

“…”

Kamijou was unsure what to say as Last Order rolled around on the floor. As he stood there unsure what to do, the teary-eyed little girl stood on her tiptoes once more to indicate the goggles hanging from her neck.

(Okay, I can’t screw it up this time.)

In some cases, that thought more or less ensured it would happen again.

Long story short: the same snapping noise was heard once more.

This time, Kamijou was kicked to the ground and then stomped on by Last Order, but that seemed to put her back in a good mood. She then held the goggles up towards Kamijou once more.

She was quite brave.

Kamijou was extra careful to live up to that spirit of hers and he finally succeeded in adjusting the length of the rubber strap so it stayed on Last Order's forehead. The goggles themselves still seemed too big for her, but he managed to tighten it enough that they did not slide down.

"Oohhh!!" said Last Order with a joyous look on her face.

She brought both hands to her forehead and spun around on the spot.

Then a thought came to Kamijou.

(Come to think of it, is she just wandering around on her own? Misaka Imouto was with her before, but she's gone now. Did they get split up?)

It was hard to tell in the underground mall, but it was just before 6 PM. The sun would be setting soon. He wanted to get that helpless child back to her guardian, but he had no idea if that guardian was anywhere nearby.

(Hmm, what should I do? If her guardian is nearby, what would I look like to them? Oh, hell. I get the feeling they would say something like "What do you think you're doing to my child?")

And then…

Kamijou felt someone's gaze on him.

He had a very bad feeling about what was to come.

"What is it? says Misaka as Misaka asks you a simple question."

Kamijou turned around without answering Last Order's innocent question.

He slowly and cautiously turned around.

“You’ve gotta be kidding me…” groaned Kamijou when he saw who was looking at him.

Part 4

“And Touma always, always, allllllways goes off somewhere and leaves me behind. Maybe it’s what you call wanderlust. The next thing you know, he’s always off on some new journey.”

“…”

Accelerator used his modern cane to walk through the underground mall where it was difficult to distinguish between day and night. All of the students walking about seemed a bit rushed, but that was probably because the last train and bus were set to the city-wide curfew.

“I wonder why he does that. It’s not that he doesn’t like where he is, but there’s nothing specific he likes about the places he goes to either. He just seems to wander around and around and around and around and around.”

“…”

Accelerator still did not know who this “Touma” person was, but from what he had heard, he sounded like a horrible person. For some reason, it pissed him off each time he heard the name.

Index grabbed the calico cat that was wandering around the area and said, “By the way, what are you doing here?”

“Looking for someone.”

“Is it that girl on your cell phone?”

“What’s it to you?” replied Accelerator carelessly.

He had no real reason to hide it, but he had a feeling that brat would keep asking more and more and more questions. He knew this because he knew someone a lot like her.

Index merely looked confused while holding the cat.

“Hey, hey. Come to think of it, I never did anything to show my thanks.”

“Just shut up and get lost, you damn brat. I get the feeling that having a pain-in-the-ass brat like you around will bring nothing but trouble.”

“I never did anything to show my thanks.”

“…”

She just ignored him.

Accelerator gave her an annoyed look, but Index ignored that too.

“I can help you look for that girl until I find Touma,” she said with a smile.

She had no idea what kind of person she was speaking to.

“…God dammit,” he cursed when he heard that perfectly innocent voice.

This was the day he first realized that dealing with the good will of others was exhausting.

Part 5

It was Aogami Pierce and Tsuchimikado Motoharu he found standing there.

The two of them looked at Kamijou, looked at Last Order, and then looked back at Kamijou.

And then they said in unison, “You didn’t!!”

“What is that reaction even supposed to mean!?” shouted back Kamijou.

Last Order quickly grew cautious and moved from Kamijou’s side to hide behind his back.

Tsuchimikado and Aogami Pierce paid that no heed.

“Nyahh! Y’know, I could understand Komoe-sensei what with her real age and all, but what is this, nyah? How can you defend this, nyahh!?”

“Y-you bastard!! Do you have no integrity at all!? Kami-yan, just how all-encompassing and gapless is your stance on this kind of thing!? I get the feeling you would try to hit on some lovely old lady sitting on a porch with an arched back and a cat on her lap!”

“But!” shouted Aogami Pierce and Tsuchimikado in unison as they stared Kamijou in the eye. They both showed the world’s most wonderful smile and said, “As your friends! We will pray for your success!!”

Kamijou clenched his fists with the intention of getting rid of those two and their dangerous comments.

“You two…”

Imagine Breaker was the perfect name for his power. That name taught him that this was the perfect time to use it.

As Kamijou and the others began a great brawl, Last Order cautiously called out to Kamijou.

“U-um…Are they friends of yours? asks Misaka as Misaka checks to make sure.”

“A kid like you mustn’t watch this! The lives these two lead and the stupid crap they talk about is too much for you!!”

Kamijou swung his fists as if he was using them to stamp an R-rating on those two idiots’ foreheads. It seemed a day of rest was still a long way off for him.

Part 6

While filled with anger, Mikoto walked quickly through the underground mall with her arms folded.

Her Tokiwadai Middle School uniform still made her stand out enough that the other students passing by would glance over at her. She normally did not mind, but for some reason, she was feeling more and more irritable today.

(And after he promised me he would go through with the punishment game. That bastard…)

She was silently muttering to herself.

The very fact that this pissed her off so much displeased Mikoto. She did not like how heavily her feelings were weighted in his direction no matter what emotion it happened to be.

Even as she left that area (or rather, that boy), she kept glancing back over her shoulder. She simply was not able to rationally go over her thoughts.

(…He was relieved.)

She lightly kicked the floor of the underground mall without thinking.

She then sighed.

(Of course he was. This is all because of a simple punishment game. I still can't believe he forgot about it after being the one to suggest it in the first place, though. But I guess when you're being dragged around against your will, it's only natural to want to be freed from it as soon as possible.)

After the fact, she felt like a complete imbecile for having gotten so excited about it on her own.

Mikoto's gaze dropped to the small paper bag from the phone company. She looked at the small frog mascot that's head was poking out of the bag.

(It’s only natural, but…)

She felt a strong feeling of having been left behind.

Mikoto saw her pouting face reflected in one of the shiny polished pillars of the underground mall. That was all it took to make her want to slap her own face.

(It’s not like that idiot’s actions were against the rules of the punishment game. There is nothing particularly wrong with *her* clinging to his side. So what was I doing? Now that I’ve calmed down, that seems like a pretty childish reaction.)

She was getting sick of the entire idea of a punishment game.

If she had known she would end up feeling like this, she would never have made the bet during the Daihaseisai. She felt like she had lost in everything that had to do with it. Not only that, she felt everyone around her had lost thanks to it as well.

She wanted to just sit in the corner of her room with her arms around her knees.

But she also wanted something right then and there to relieve her stress.

Was there nothing that would do that?

(…)

She glanced around and the only recreational store she saw was an arcade. A game called Skill Attack that was well known for being incredibly difficult was set up at the front of the store. Basically, the player used their power against a mitt-shaped “target” that was built to be shock absorbent. The machine used a psychic power measurement device to output a number representing the strength of the player’s power. It was a type of stress relief machine.

Mikoto unsteadily walked over to it. Once the Western sweets shop next to the arcade was completely out of sight, just how irritated she was became very, very clear.

There was no semblance of femininity left in her.

She inserted a few 100 yen coins.

The “target” portion was designed like a sign. A pillar made of a steel pipe had a square batter’s mitt made of a polyurethane-like material attached. The target appeared much shinier and newer than the rest of the machine, so it was probably disposable. It may have been changed out every other day.

(I doubt it can stand up to a Level 5.)

Mikoto sighed.

This type of machine was generally advertised as being able to withstand anyone up through Level 4, but the general etiquette was to keep it down to no higher than Level 3.

(Honestly, I even have to hold back when relieving stress…)

While complaining under her breath, Mikoto glanced over at the small warning note.

It said, “The latest versions will be created based on the powers used on this one. Please help us gather actual data with the eventual goal of allowing even Level 5 use!”

“…”

Mikoto froze in place.

A large grin then appeared on her face as if the stress in her body was gushing out.

An eerie sparking noise came from her silky bangs.

Misaka Mikoto took in a deep, deep breath.

And then she helped them gather some data.

She went pretty much all out.

“That damn idiot!! What! Does! He! Think! A! Promise! Is!? And after *I* worked so hard checking the scores after every event during the Daihaseisai!!”

With a great crackling roar, the arcade machine using a power measurement

device rocked back and forth. It was built to withstand a fair amount of shock, but this had been enough to rip up the earthquake-resistant bolts holding the machine to the ground. It began letting out a silly-sounding alarm. The gentle atmosphere of the underground mall underwent a sudden change. The students walking around began yelling “Ugyahh!?”, “Wh-what was that!?”, and “Wait, wait up!!” as they began running away.

After venting all of her feelings at the machine, Mikoto panted with her shoulders moving up and down.

“Dingaling♪” came a small electronic tone.

She looked over and found she had made a new high score.

“…How pointless,” muttered Mikoto. “…”

She moved away from the large machine and headed back the way she had come.

Getting angry all on her own accomplished nothing. She decided to admit she had been acting childish and apologize. He had done nothing wrong in giving that Sister a present. She was a bit worried she would be unable to make herself lower her head to that idiot, but she took a deep breath and decided to at least try to be mature.

But a punishment was a punishment.

He was much mistaken if he thought she was going to let her victory from the Daihaseisai end here.

At any rate, Mikoto wanted to speak with him again, so she picked up her pace.

Part 7

After somehow succeeding in getting Aogami Pierce and Tsuchimikado

Motoharu to reconsider their actions, Kamijou checked the clock on his phone. It was already past 6 PM. The sun would be setting outside the underground mall.

“Hmm, those were some very unique friends, comments Misaka as Misaka folds her arms and tilts her head. And why are there still some parts Misaka cannot comprehend? says Misaka as Misaka rechecks the words spoken one by one.”

Despite what Last Order said, Kamijou figured it was no big deal. It was for the best if she did not understand some of what was said.

“Mh, it’s this late already? says Misaka as Misaka feels the need to hurry,” said the girl suddenly.

Kamijou could not see any clocks on the walls and the sky could not be seen inside the underground mall. That meant she must have gotten the information via the rumored Misaka Network.

Last Order turned around and said, “Hey, Misaka needs to get home before long, says Misaka as Misaka gives her unfortunate announcement.”

“Well, it is getting late.”

Kamijou had just been thinking it was about time a girl of her age got home, so he was relieved.

“Yes,” she agreed. “Misaka wanted to stay with you longer, says Misaka as Misaka grows a bit downhearted. It was just a coincidence that Misaka ran into you here, but she really did want to thank you, says Misaka as Misaka expresses her true feelings.”

Last Order brought both hands up to the goggles on her forehead.

“And you gave Misaka this,” she said. “But Misaka thinks *he* will be worried, says Misaka as Misaka continues on after remembering. If Misaka is too late, he might head out to look for her. Misaka does not want to cause him any trouble, says Misaka as Misaka smiles.”

“Hmm,” said Kamijou.

He did not know who she was talking about, but he got the general impression

that he was probably a good person.

“He is weak,” continued Last Order. “He was hurt a lot. He could never protect what he had and the hands he used to save those things are worn down, says Misaka as Misaka provides fragmentary information. So Misaka does not want to put any more of a burden on him. This time, Misaka will protect him, says Misaka as Misaka speaks her mind.”

“I see,” said Kamijou despite not understanding half of what she had said.

Not a hint of falsehood could be seen on Last Order’s face.

Kamijou decided this “he” was not just probably a good person; he was definitely a good person.

“He can be cool too, says Misaka as Misaka gives some extra information. After all, he kept fighting for Misaka even while covered in blood and horribly battered, says Misaka as Misaka brags.”

Kamijou felt a great familiarity with that behavioral pattern, but he kept his mouth shut as he had no proof it was the same.

“Bye bye,” said Last Order as she left and waved her hand.

Kamijou watched her leave. Her small form quickly disappeared into the crowd that was hurried thanks to the curfew, and therefore the last train, coming up soon.

Kamijou decided to head home too, so he turned around. At that moment, he suddenly spotted a familiar figure.

“Hm?”

“She” was headed his way.

Part 8

“Oh, it’s Touma…”

Index suddenly stopped while standing next to Accelerator.

She was looking down the passageway.

“Is that the person you were looking for?”

“Yeah.”

Accelerator looked vaguely in the same direction, but the crowd was too large to tell who she was talking about. In fact, he did not even really know who it was she had been looking for.

Index looked up at Accelerator’s face.

He said, “Go.”

“But what about your friend?”

“Don’t worry,” spat out Accelerator. “I just found her.”

He spoke those words while looking in the same direction that Index had been looking. He could see a small girl running his way through the crowd of primarily middle and high school students.

Accelerator knew her name.

He had no idea if it actually counted as her real name and he had no idea how much value there was in a name thought up by researchers to make the paperwork more convenient. But the same went for Accelerator. He doubted anyone knew his real name.

And since everyone referred to her in the same way, it was effectively her name.

And so Accelerator called out that name.

“Last Order!”

When she heard her name called, the small girl started running even faster. Her face was covered in a ridiculously happy expression.

Meanwhile, Accelerator heard small footsteps next to him.

“Okay, I’ll be going then. Thanks,” said Index. “Touma!!”

The slight footsteps grew stronger. That girl who had been with him for just a few dozen minutes ran off into the crowd.

She did not turn back.

In the same way, Last Order did not look back.

The two girls approached the same spot of the underground mall, crossed paths, and then headed off in opposite directions without ever noticing each other.

They continued on to their respective destinations.

It took less than 10 seconds for Last Order to reach Accelerator.

“Misaka is back, says Misaka as Misaka gives the usual greeti-…Ow! Why are you silently karate chopping Misaka again and again!? shouts Misaka as Misaka holds her head and pretends to cry!!”

While he repeatedly struck the girl’s head, he let out all of his displeasure.

“Where they hell have you been?”

“I was playing, says Misaka as Misaka gives an honest answer.”

“Hmph,” said Accelerator.

He gave one last glance into the crowd, wondering what had happened to that nuisance of a nun.

But he could see no sign of her.

All he could see was a vague crowd.

Everything was back to normal.

Between the lines 4

The name of the building Sasha Kreutzev sat within was the Phenomena Control and Reduction Reproduction Facility.

Technically, that term referred to a collection of buildings created by the Russian Orthodox Church. The Russian Orthodox Church was primarily an organization created to analyze and resolve spiritual phenomena. When an incident occurred, they would create a facility that recreated the scene of the phenomenon in actual size.

That thorough accuracy was mostly meant to display how relentless they were.

According to the Christian Church, the souls of the dead would head to heaven, purgatory, or hell. Therefore no souls remained in this world. For that reason, the Russian Orthodox Church viewed anything trying to deceive the living as fakes meant to take advantage of the sorrow people saw in death. By their definition, such things were only thought to exist by their absence. It was the same idea as a missing piece of a jigsaw puzzle.

There were extremely rare cases of (real) wandering spirits appearing such as the Jack-o'-Lantern, but the Christian Church viewed those as the souls of criminals who were not worthy of going to heaven but had been barred from entering hell as well.

Anything trying to deceive the living needed to be killed by any means necessary.

That was the only conclusion they could reach.

Whether they were real or fake, they were enemies. The Russian Orthodox Church's method was to eliminate all such annoyances as if they were the same. A ghost's regrets, reminiscences, or grudges were all beside the point. If they were wandering on earth, they were evil. The Russian Orthodox Church's style was to laugh scornfully at any such circumstances and then crush them.

There were of course exceptions of humans who had been brought back to life at

the hands of the Son of God, the Twelve Apostles, or someone similar. However, that could only be pulled off by the Son of God or history's most powerful Saints. Your average sinner or vengeful dead person could not manage it.

The facility was used to obtain the investigative information needed to crush those enemies no questions asked.

That was where Sasha was.

It was reminiscent of the cities created in the middle of a desert for a Hollywood movie, but its accuracy was much greater than a city street created for filming that's reverse side was made of papier mache.

It had started with facilities for just an incident or two, but more and more new reference facilities had been created around them. Now, it was large enough to hold two or three entire cities. This was a method only possible in Russia, a country so massive it cut horizontally across almost the entirety of the Eurasian continent.

Inside a building perfectly modeled after a certain palace, Sasha poured brandy into her black tea and drank from her cup with a book in one hand. This was the reference facility said to be the oldest of all the buildings in that movie village known by the overly long name of the Phenomena Control and Reduction Reproduction Facility.

The palace had a mixture of many different cultures. The occult aspects were all based in Christianity and a large onion-like objet d'art was located on the top of the roof.

"…"

Despite her small figure, Sasha again and again poured lots and lots of brandy into her tea like someone with a sweet tooth pouring sugar in. Rather than just flavoring the drink a bit, she was now essentially drinking a tea-flavored alcohol.

The thick book in her hand had the title "The True Form of Angels in a Different Shape" written in shiny foil. The Original of the book would be in the original palace, but the book had been perfectly reproduced down to the last letter as a prop for the facility. The facility was well known for having a lot of grimoire copies for a place that was not a grimoire library.

(Important notes concerning an angel being lowered into a human body.)

Sasha’s hand stopped on the page she had been looking for.

Her small fingertip moved through the handwritten letters from a time before printing technology had been developed. She occasionally frowned while working through the cryptanalysis work she was not used to, but she refused to take a break. She had a reason for doing this work despite not being used to it.

Something strange had happened to her body.

The visible symptom was the irregular slight trembling of her fingertips. And the invisible symptom was her strange ability to detect magic power. Or perhaps it would be better to describe it as a type of rejection reaction. The degree of the reaction differed, but she would feel a pressure in her chest when a large amount of magic power was being used nearby.

These symptoms had begun towards the end of August, but she had no idea what could have caused it. When she had been examined at a large-scale facility, they had said her condition was similar to that of someone who had had highly concentrated Telesma residing in their body for a long period, but she had not taken part in any such magical experiment.

What had happened to her body?

That investigation had gone beyond Sasha herself. The entire Russian Orthodox Church was already secretly viewing it as a pending issue. Anyone in the Christian Church could borrow Telesma and it was not rare for it to directly reside in someone’s body. Sasha herself even used it in battle. But this was the first time such special symptoms had appeared.

It also bothered Sasha that interest in her condition went beyond her organization of Annihilatus. The entire Russian Orthodox Church was interested in it. This made her suspect there was something more to it, but she had to give her own body precedence.

Needless to say, the time when Telesma resided in a human body on the largest scale was during the time of the Annunciation. With the Son of God’s total amount of Telesma – that is, an amount massive enough to support and guide this world – contained within a human womb, the human would normally

explode. But the Virgin Mary used her special characteristics as the pair for the holy fatherhood to its fullest so that-…

“Hmm,” muttered Sasha as she nodded and read through the text.

She did not notice the threat approaching from behind.

“Saaaashaaaa♪”

Her entire expressionless face twitched when she heard that horribly ingratiating voice.

But it was too late.

Two hands stretched under Sasha’s arms and grabbed ahold of her small breasts before she could take up a defensive position.

The voice behind her said, “Since you’re studying so hard you have no idea what is happening around you, I think it’s time you took a break. Wait, nwaahhh!?”

The voice cried out because Sasha had pulled a hammer and an L-shaped crowbar from her waist to prepare for battle. The hammer must have had some kind of magical treatment performed on it because a large crater practically exploded into the table the instant the head of the hammer touched it.

Sasha Kreutzev turned around with the weapon in hand.

The person who had been behind her grew pale.

“S-Sasha? This facility was created as a perfect spiritual replica of the scene of an incident, so its role will be compromised if you keep destroying items inside it!!”

“My first response: You can send a written apology to Bishop Nikolai Tolstoy.”

“No, wouldn’t you be the one to write it!? Dammit, why does Sasha look so lovely even while feigning ignorance like this!?”

Sasha sighed as the person waved their hands about.

She was Sasha’s direct superior.

Her name was Vasilisa. She was a woman with white skin that had just begun to show some signs of decline and she was exceedingly worried about ultraviolet rays and spots on the skin. While battles with “those that should not exist” was their basic nighttime activity, she had lately formed a bad habit of saying staying up late was bad for the skin and heading home on her own. This meant Sasha often had to catch Vasilisa’s body in a lasso and throw her into the middle of a group of their target.

But back to her name of “Vasilisa”.

It was unclear why she had taken the name of a heroine form a Russian fairy tale, but it was of course a fake name. She apparently just barely qualified as being in her late twenties, but no one knew the exact number. She would just say “Women have plenty of secrets!”, but she would look depressed for about half a day if someone responded with “So basically no one would celebrate your birthday”.

That horribly immature superior caused Sasha lots of problems. The main issue was that this was not an issue of the past. She was *still* constantly causing her problems.

Vasilisa glanced at the pages of the book Sasha had been reading and said, “You’re reading some musty old book again? So have you still not figured out what happened to your body? Then how about I give that body a thorough examination. Eh heh heh. Ah ha.”

Sasha took the hammer spinning in her hand and swung it down on Vasilisa’s head.

After hearing a nice, dull noise, she said, “My first question: Would you prefer the hammer or the screwdriver?”

“It’s not a very useful question if you wait until after the fact to ask. Oh, Sasha. Your destructive power is as unthinkable as ever.”

She did not want to hear that from the superior who had not batted an eye at being struck by a hammer with magical effects meant for torture. Vasilisa liked to joke, but she was actually stronger than Sasha.

“Come to think of it, wasn’t the Telesma that resided in you the back-oriented

blue color of Gabriel?”

“My second question: what does it matter?”

“And wasn’t it a normally unthinkable amount that might have even been greater than the total amount of the Twelve Apostles?”

“My third question: What does that-…”

“Bpph. Wasn’t Gabriel the angel that was responsible for the Annunciation? And wasn’t that when an amount of power greater than the Twelve Apostles was forced into a woman’s body? Oh? Oh, oh? Sasha, by any chance is your stomach growing a bit plump…bggh!?”

Sasha swung a saw such that it struck Vasilisa directly in the face

The woman remained unscathed.

“Ah, sorry, sorry. That’s right. With that heavy restraining outfit you always wear, you could never withstand pleasureless baby-making, could you?”

“My fourth question: Don’t sully even one holy page of the New Testament, you piece of shit. An added explanation: You abused your authority to force me to wear this outfit.”

Sasha was wearing a restraining outfit made up of black belts and a red mantle worn over a see-through suit that looked like nothing but innerwear. Overall, it looked like something a perverted old man would wear at night. Vasilisa had claimed it was so she could restrain herself as a last resort if her own body was possessed by “those that should not exist”, but it was plainly nothing more than her own tastes.

Sasha did not want to even touch such a slutty outfit, but unfortunately Vasilisa was her direct superior. She had to obey the oaths she had made on paper. She would feel like a complete fool if she was sent to a convent (or rather, a detention center called a convent) for disobeying over something so ridiculous.

Naturally, not all Russian Orthodox nuns wore that outfit. The Russian Orthodox Church was not a collection of perverts.

Sasha hid her body behind her red mantle and glared up at her superior.

Vasilisa cackled while wearing a completely normal red habit.

“Eh? You dislike it that much?”

“My second response: That question in and of itself is an insult to my personality.”

“Then let’s get you a different outfit,” readily replied Vasilisa.

“…?”

Sasha was a bit taken aback by this as she looked up at her superior through her bangs that got in the way. Vasilisa started rummaging through the old-looking bag at her feet.

“Y’see, for business reasons, I was doing some investigation into Academy City and that island nation’s occult.”

“…”

Sasha had a bad feeling about what was to come.

She had a feeling she must not see what was inside that bag.

She had not received any help from an astrological institution, but she felt a distinct chilly premonition for some reason.

“Well, it turns out Academy City has a certain unique culture. And when I say culture, I think you can guess what I mean. Japan really has given me a lot of excellent reference material. I got my hands on some genuine data and worked hard to sew it thread by thread. Ah ha♪”

Sasha looked over to the door.

She started to calculate out its thickness and materials.

“So Sasha, have you ever heard of Magical Powered Kanamin?”

She used her L-shaped crowbar to break through the heavy door and escape.

When she had seen the outfit Vasilisa was holding out while smiling from ear to ear, Sasha had thought she was going to cry. She had known that superior had been gathering information on Japan’s suspicious otaku culture via France, but she had never thought the woman had gotten quite that crazy.

She could never stand to wear that shiny and sparkling outfit.

Sasha Kreutzev was a battle nun belonging to the Russian Orthodox Church’s special forces known as Annihilatus. She fought harshly with the desire of bringing extinction to “those that should not exist”, so she could not run around in such a thin and fluttering outfit.

She decided it might be in her best interest to transfer to another post.

No one would want to die in battle while wearing such a hardcore outfit.

Chapter 5: Vaguely Passing Sunset.
Hard_Way,Hard_Luck.

Part 1

“Ohh, it’s raining, observes Misaka as Misaka looks up into the night sky. But Misaka wanted to see the moon, she says in a bit of disappointment.”

Last Order caught the raindrops on her palms along the dark street.

Since the trains and buses stopped once the curfew had passed in Academy City, most of the residents had disappeared from the streets. All that remained were the gutsier types that liked the nightlife and did not feel the need to head home that day. Even the nearby simple bus stop with a corrugated galvanized iron roof was empty.

The rain continued to fall.

It was not enough to require an umbrella, but it was still enough to keep the students enjoying the nightlife off of the streets. They must have entered some store or another rather than hanging around outside.

Accelerator’s bored eyes followed Last Order around as she restlessly wandered from place to place.

“That’s getting annoying, so stay put.”

“Oh, is that the puppy that’s been wandering around this area taking shelter from the rain in that bus stop!? says Misaka as Misaka dashes over to begin pursuit!!”

“Do I need to put a collar and leash on you, you damn brat!?”

He grabbed the back of the small girl's neck with all his strength. He did not have the energy to chase after her again if she ran off. If she did, it was entirely possible he would knock over a nearby building in his anger.

Last Order shook her arms around.

"Misaka doesn't need you to be so overprotective, says Misaka as Misaka asks for freedom and liberation."

"What kind of frontier spirit bullshit is that? And if you want to see how 'protective' I am, just keep it up. I'll punch you in the gut so hard you pass out. That would make this a lot easier."

"Now, now. You don't have to be that shy, says Misaka as Misaka taps her index finger against-…Wait, why are you clenching your fist? asks Misaka as Misaka brings out a big smile to soften your harsh emotions."

"What a pain in the ass," Accelerator muttered under his breath with a sigh.

Not everything about this tidy everyday life was bright and shiny. Every world had things to be dissatisfied with. A perfect world where everything worked the way you wanted it was actually a solitary place that ignored the circumstances of others.

These languid annoyances could be thought of as the contract fee required to live in this world.

Accelerator understood that.

He let out a sardonic grin inside his heart.

The effects of growing used to something were frightening indeed.

Just who did he think he was to not only accept this environment as normal but to make complaints about it?

How could he after everything he had done?

He needed to thank the god who supposedly resided above the clouds for the mere fact that he was standing there at that moment.

And as Accelerator gave deep thought to these issues, a voice reached his ears.

“Ow!! …Misaka tripped, says Misaka as Misaka gives a report from the ground.”

“You’re just complaining.”

“I scraped myself, says Misaka as Misaka looks at her palm.”

As Last Order got up from the roadway that was wet with rain, her slightly wet and muddy palm had a slight scrape. Some red blood could be seen, but it was just seeping out slightly.

“Misaka might need disinfectant, says Misaka as Misaka grows a bit teary eyed.”

“Just spit on it.”

“Misaka might need disinfectant!! shouts Misaka as Misaka cries out the exact same line!!”

“...Just how annoying can you get? We can find something back at Yomikawa’s place.”

“…”

Last Order remained silent.

Accelerator looked over and she began speaking while biting her small lip.

“Okay, says Misaka as Misaka accepts that. It hurts, but Misaka will put up with it, says Misaka as Misaka begins walking along behind you.”

She must have been trying to do what he had said because Last Order faced forward and did not look back at the wound on her palm.

But it looked like she had to actively avoid looking at it.

Last Order kept her mouth clenched shut and said nothing as she followed Accelerator. In exchange for the absence of words, he felt an odd sort of pressure. It was the aura of someone who could start crying at any moment.

“…God dammit.”

Accelerator clicked his tongue.

Having her make a big fuss out of it would only make everything more annoying. Accelerator used the hand not holding his modern cane to press a finger against Last Order’s forehead. He then gave a hard push backwards. He had not used much strength, but she was so caught off guard that she fell straight backwards.

“Wah! says Misaka as Misa-…!?”

Last Order waved her arms around, but she was unable to regain her balance and fell backwards onto her butt.

But she did not land on hard asphalt.

She landed on the roofed bus stop’s bench.

Last Order looked confused while glancing around the bus stop protected by the simple corrugated galvanized iron roof.

Without looking back at her, Accelerator said, “Wait there. If you go anywhere else, I’ll kick your ass.”

He spat on the street.

With an annoyed click of his tongue, he used his modern cane to head to drugstore. It was only about 200 meters away, but he still found it a giant pain in the ass to walk there.

He entered the store.

The unnecessarily spacious drugstore was filled with shelf after shelf placed freely around the store. Seeing that was enough to make Accelerator feel some pressure. But the feeling was lessened somewhat since the ceiling was about 5 times higher than the shelves.

The store was almost entirely empty due to the curfew having passed.

Due to what they sold, drugstores were required to remain open around the clock, but the look on the clerk's face made it clear he would rather close up and go watch TV.

Accelerator was originally planning to buy disinfectant and simple cloth bandages, but he decided to just get some adhesive bandages instead. It was only a small wound. The cloth bandages would be overkill.

(Overprotective.)

A bitter expression appeared on Accelerator's face when he remembered that impertinent term she had used.

It simply was not normal for him to be staring at boxes of adhesive bandages with a worried look on his face and a shopping basket hanging from one arm. Had a screw come loose in his mind? He tossed the package of bandages in the basket with an irritated look and used his cane to walk up to the register.

He opened his wallet to find nothing but change.

It took him a bit to remember that his money had disappeared feeding that strange nun named Index.

"…God dammit," he muttered and the clerk behind the register's shoulders jumped.

It was unlikely he actually knew who Accelerator was, but the aura coming from Accelerator was simply too dangerous.

He then spotted some more colorful bandages lined up on a shelf right next to the register counter. They seemed to be marketed towards children. A number of different kits for simple injuries were lined up with them. They seemed to be leftovers from the Daihaseisai.

"What are these? How are they different from the normal ones?" he asked.

The clerk frantically answered while looking like his heart was trying to escape through his mouth. One was a disinfectant that would not sting. One was a bandage with an adhesive that would not stick to the injury itself. One was a normal cloth bandage with a sweet aroma that would mask any medicinal smell.

Apparently they were all designed with children in mind.

Accelerator thought for a bit on the fact that they were made for children.

(Overprotective.)

He kicked the counter with one foot.

The clerk smiled while looking like he was about to faint. But his expression relaxed a bit when Accelerator tossed the children's disinfectant and adhesive bandages into his basket. He may have thought Accelerator was a kid who hated scabs despite his tough appearance.

Accelerator somehow managed to scrape together enough change to pay.

Since the trains had already stopped for the day, he had no reason to avoid being left with no money in his wallet.

Accelerator left the store and walked through the slightly rainy street with the drugstore bag reflecting the streetlights. A mascot character with deformed proportions was smiling on the bag.

"…What nonsense," he spat out.

He had asked Yomikawa if he would ever get used to doing this kind of thing, but he already knew the answer. He would never get used to it. What was he even doing? Accelerator was supposed to be standing in the position most removed from this kind of thing. There was something wrong with rushing through the streets at night while carefully carrying bandages to heal an insignificant little injury when you had killed over 10,000 human beings. It was nonsensical. How was anyone supposed to react if they saw him doing this? The only possible reaction would be a scornful laugh.

Was it okay for him to get used to this?

Was it okay for him to be worried about a trivial little scratch?

He was a monster that had spilled well over 10,000 liters of blood.

"God dammit."

Accelerator clicked his tongue.

He had actually answered those questions back on August 31st. No matter how horrible a human being he may have been, that had nothing to do with that brat. And so he would take any action no matter how out of place it was for him if that brat was in danger.

It was a nice opinion.

But that alone was not enough.

In the end, that could be seen as forcing his own burden onto that brat.

Wasn't that nothing more than passing the responsibility of being his driving force onto her?

(What is it that I want?)

Accelerator lightly clenched his teeth.

(Why am I so pissed? What do I feel is missing? Hah. Like I can figure it out. You know damn well you aren't the type to try to "find yourself".)

At that point, his thoughts were cut off.

They were cut off by a black van slamming into his body at full speed.

It came from behind.

He was standing on the sidewalk clearly distinguished from the road.

A thick guardrail separated the sidewalk and the road.

But…

The jet black van easily tore through the guardrail and onto the sidewalk Accelerator was on. It showed no sign of using its brakes. Fragments of the van's lights, bumper, and other parts scattered throughout the area and the windshield made a noise like azuki beans were hitting it as it shattered to pieces. Torn pieces of the metal guardrail flew through the air and struck the shutters of the multi-tenant building facing the sidewalk. Each roar of destruction seemed to bring

about yet another roar of destruction.

It was as if a bomb had gone off.

And amid it all…

Accelerator calmly stood in the exact same spot and pose as he had three seconds before.

His hand was held against the side of his neck.

He audibly cracked his neck.

His slender finger was pressed up against the control switch for his choker-shaped electrode.

He had activated his reflection.

The person who stood there was now Academy City's strongest Level 5 who could escape a direct hit from a nuclear weapon unscathed.

(What was that?)

Accelerator turned around.

He stared at the black van that had slammed into him.

A crater had been created in the middle of the metal on the front and center of the van as if a shell had hit it. The rest had crumbled up around that central crater. The destruction was to the point where it was unclear whether it should be called a van or simply called wreckage.

The sun had already set, but the headlights were off. This was not simply due to the lights breaking in the crash. They had been off from the beginning.

(It's like they were trying to approach from behind without me noticing.)

In addition to the headlights being off, there were signs that the license plate had been forcibly changed, the airbag showed no sign of deploying despite the impact being strong enough to smash the windshield, and the keyhole on the door showed signs of having been forced open, suggesting the black van was

stolen.

(I guess that clinches it.)

On top of it all, a man dressed all in black was groaning in the crushed driver's seat.

He wore the armored outfit of some sort of special forces and had a mask that covered his entire head. To finish it off, he had thick goggles like those of a skier covering his eyes.

(They must either have some grudge against me or belong to some research institution that's desperate to use me.)

A smile split horizontally across Accelerator's face.

That look of joy grew and grew as he saw a military handgun grip on the man's chest.

(They're here. I knew these idiots would be coming. These pieces of shit *want to bring me back*. These pieces of trash can't read the air, the atmosphere, the mood, or the rules.)

Accelerator raised his head.

He looked up at the man in the driver's seat whose face was just a bit higher than his own. And he grinned.

"…You're dead."

A roar reverberated through the dark street.

It only took an instant.

Accelerator reached his arm in through the opening the windshield had previously been in. His slender arm headed straight for the face of that man in black as if it was being sucked in. More specifically, it headed for his mouth. He jammed the four fingers minus the thumb of that hand into the man's mouth. His white hand broke straight through the black knife-proof mask and went straight to the back of the man's throat. The thumb reached around below the man's chin.

He then pulled his arm back.

With a cracking noise, the man’s jaw was dislocated.

“Ah ha ha gyah ha ah ha ha ha hee hee hee gyah ha ha ah ha ah ha ah ha ha ha ha!!”

With an explosive laugh, Accelerator pulled the man’s body out of the driver’s seat like he was catching a giant tuna with a single fishing pole. He then threw the man behind him. The man in black flew straight over the sidewalk and slammed into the shutter of the multi-tenant building.

This created a great noise like the crash of lightning.

Accelerator heard a frightened gasp from the backseat of the black van.

There was more.

Accelerator’s red eyes crawled back over.

“Hmm? This is great. Ah ha ha. Holy shit. This is fucking amazing!!”

He charged into the van through the broken windshield like a wild beast.

He ripped out the passenger seat like it was a weed and headed to the backseat. The entire van shook eerily. It was as if the metal and interior were moving out of Accelerator’s way on their own. Due to the twisted frame, the sound of bolts bursting loose and windows breaking could be heard again and again. It sounded like a steel balloon being forcibly inflated.

Another man sat in the backseat.

Before he could frantically draw his gun, Accelerator grabbed his head and slammed it straight down. With a silly-sounding noise, the backseat split open and the man’s head sank into the cotton.

Only the sound of the scratchy breath coming from Accelerator’s own throat could be heard.

“Ha ha ha. …Ugh, I’m sick of this. I’ve lost interest. I’m not a complete monster.” Accelerator laughed. “Dammit. I won’t kill you. It’s too much of a pain in the ass. I’ll let you off easy and give you a discount: 50% off.”

“Ah…Ueh…”

The man’s voice was unintelligible, probably due to the cotton of the seat getting in his mouth.

Even so, the man in black desperately worked to get his words out.

“…Gh. 50%...off? M-money…?”

“No.” Accelerator gently shook his head. “I’ll only peel 50% of your skin off. If you survive that, I’ll let you go.”

“Ghee!!” screamed the man, sounding like some kind of insect.

Accelerator smiled.

His expression was amused, joyous, happy, and entertained. It was the

expression of someone licking ice cream on the first day after their diet.

Accelerator heard the sound of something scraping across the road surface and found three other black vans coming to quick stops around him. He stared out through the broken windows at them. Were they stolen as well? He sighed inwardly while thinking about how much trouble they had gone to search out so many of the same model.

“This is getting boring.”

He cancelled his special 50% off service.

He instead grabbed the insect-like man’s head between his five fingers like it was a basketball.

A sound similar to a metal bat being swung was heard. He had casually tossed the man in black out through a broken window.

The loser slid to the side across the asphalt. Without even taking time to check on the man’s laughable state, the back doors of the three vehicles surrounding the destroyed one slid open.

But no one came out.

Instead, countless gun barrels poked out.

When he saw that, Accelerator sighed. At the same time, he swung his fist straight down as if to vent his anger. That vector-controlling strike applied fatal damage to the already twisted frame of the van, cracks ran through the various pipes, and sparks flew about.

Explosive blasts and waves of heat scattered in every direction, swallowing up the entire area.

Repeated muffled screams came from the three vans. Even though they were inside the vans and had masks covering their faces, they had still been struck by a blast of high temperature wind at close range. A few whose throats had been burned writhed around and even fell out of the sliding door they themselves had opened and onto the road.

“Thanks for the nice production work. …You should thank me for blowing you away in such a spectacular fashion.”

A voice came from the flames.

Accelerator leisurely walked through the wreckage and the flames that spread out in a pomegranate red. He could only use his reflection for 15 minutes, but that did not seem to be a problem. In fact, he could finish everything in 10 seconds after causing disarray within the enemy to such an extent.

And then…

“This is exactly what I warned you about,” said a male voice coming from one of the vans surrounding Accelerator. “This isn’t enough to crush that brat. Don’t go soft on him just because he’s a kid. This is why I told you I should deal with him from the beginning.”

A man in black was kicked out of the back sliding door of the van that was still sitting open. Afterwards, a tall man wearing a lab coat sluggishly appeared from within. His expression showed no sign of damage. Despite being a researcher, he had a tattoo on his face. He wore mechanical gloves with a detailed form on both hands. They were known by the ridiculously long name of “micromanipulators”. As the name suggested, they were delicate pieces of technology that allowed the wearer to perform sensitive work on the scale of one-millionth of a meter.

“…”

Accelerator frowned slightly.

He recognized the researcher.

“Bh.” And the instant he saw him, he burst out laughing. “Gya ha ha ha ha!! Kihara-kun, the hell kind of pretentious entrance was that!? I wouldn’t think you were the same little intellectual who’d get scared and look away when trying to look me in the eye!!”

Kihara Amata.

He was a man who had once worked on developing the powers of Academy City’s strongest Level 5.

That meant he was one of the most skilled powers development researchers even in Academy City.

“Yeah, I really didn’t want to see you again. But it was an order from the higher ups, so I didn’t have much of a choice. Something about it being an emergency situation so they have to use every available option. Sorry, but…how bout you just let me kick your ass here?”

The man in the lab coat made a bluff, but Accelerator just ignored it.

Every single person who had taken part in researching Accelerator had been afraid of his extreme ability. To put it simply, he had never stayed in a single research facility for 2 full months. No matter how great an ambition the researcher held, they all ended up trembling in a corner of the room as soon as they saw someone whose nature vastly surpassed that.

Kihara Amata had been nothing but one of those researchers.

In fact, Accelerator knew of no other type of researcher.

With the sole exception of Yoshikawa Kikyou.

Kihara lightly shrugged the shoulders covered by his lab coat.

“Don’t say that. Who do you think it was that brought about your power?”

“Ah? What? Was that a line filled with duty and sympathy? Don’t tell me you think I’m the type of person who would return a favor. That’s just stupid. And, y’know…” Accelerator brought his left index finger to his temple and twirled it in a circle. “If you’re gonna act crazy, go do it on your own. I don’t have enough fingers to count how many researchers fucked with my body. Do you think I had any reason to remember you specifically, Passerby A? I never gave you a second thought, so get lost.”

“You really are an annoying little shit, you know that?”

Kihara wrapped his arms around his shoulders as if he was feeling cold.

A smile appeared on his face.

“I wanna kill you. I wanna kill you so damn bad. To be honest, I’ve always wanted to smash in that face of yours so bad I could barely stand it. But you were my research specimen and, more importantly, you were a kid. A terrible little brat, but a kid nonetheless. That just barely allowed me to hold back. But I shouldn’t have. I really should’ve killed you back then. Ahh…I fucked up. Ah ha ha. What was I thinking?”

As if he was inviting back a lover, Kihara opened wide the arms that wore the gloves for super delicate work that were reinforced with small motors and electrically contracting artificial muscles.

In the same pose, Kihara Amata approached Accelerator.

He approached defenselessly.

The edges of researcher’s lips twisted up.

And he said, “*So I’ll just have to kill you now, you damn brat.*”

The fist wearing the detailed metal glove flew towards Accelerator’s face.

Yet Accelerator’s smile did not crumble.

“What is this idiot thinking?” he muttered.

Without even thinking of defending, Accelerator opened his arms to welcome in Kihara Amata’s fist. And just as he was thinking of utterly breaking that idiot’s arm and tying it in a knot…

The mechanical fist tore Accelerator’s skin and shook his skull.

“Gah…h…!?”

The unexpectedness of the strike caused even more of a shock to his brain.

The switch on his choker-shaped electrode was on.

His reflection was active.

In that state, he should have been left unscathed even if he detonated a nuclear bomb he was currently carrying.

And yet…

For some reason, the vector reflection had not worked at all.

“Y’know…”

As his consciousness wavered, Accelerator could hear Kihara Amata’s voice.

It was the disappointed voice of someone looking down on another human being.

“*I never gave you a second thought either, brat.* Don’t act so damn spoiled just because you have a bit of power. Let me say it again: Who do you think it was that gave you that power? Well, do you remember now?”

“Ah…”

Before Accelerator could say anything, Kihara’s fist flew once more.

An odd noise came from the glove.

It was a strike coming down from above like he was swinging a hammer. Once again, the reflection was meaningless. When the powerful strike hit his head, Accelerator collapsed onto the wet road. His modern cane slipped from his grasp. The plastic bag from the drugstore fell to the ground and its contents scattered about.

“I’m just gonna crush you now. You’re not the real reason I’m here, so I don’t have time to play around with the likes of you.”

Kihara crushed the box of bandages underfoot.

Accelerator had bought those children’s bandages for Last Order.

The cutesy package grew dirty with rainwater and mud.

“That doesn’t suit you.” Kihara grinned while lightly stroking the mechanical glove as if to check on how his arm was doing. “Well, we’ll be retrieving *that* anyway, so don’t worry. You can just become a stain on the wall after I crush you. That suits you a lot better, don’t you think?”

“…!!”

Anger suddenly filled Accelerator’s mind.

Kihara had said Accelerator was not his true objective. And now he said he was going to retrieve “that” which was always with Accelerator.

His objective was her.

He was saying the person he had referred to as “that” would be dragged into the bloody world Accelerator and Kihara Amata were from.

“Don’t you…”

Accelerator began speaking while crawling on the ground.

From his position on the ground, he glared up at Kihara and the men in black who were looking down at him after defenselessly getting that close to him.

With some muddy rainwater on his lips, he continued speaking.

“…underestimate me, you lowly thuuuuuuuuuuuuuggggggggg!!”

The wind whipped up with a roar.

He had the power to manipulate vectors. He could control the directionality of anything that had even the slightest force. And the wind, the flow of the atmosphere around the earth, was no exception.

He created a local storm.

The 120 m/s blast of wind he controlled fell under the highest M7 class for hurricanes. The atmospheric violence was powerful enough to pick up a car or rip off a house’s roof, so it had surpassed the level of a standard missile.

“Die!” shouted Accelerator.

But…

“No, none of that.”

Just as Accelerator thought he heard an oddly dry beeping noise, the mass of raging wind he was controlling was blown away. The gathered wind scattered in all directions like the neck of a balloon had been opened.

“!?”

The attack he had thought was a sure thing was negated with ease.

Accelerator passed astonishment and was left in a complete daze.

“Like I said, you just need to die, okay?”

Kihara picked a metal pipe off the ground and beat Accelerator’s face with it.

An unpleasant creaking noise came from the surface of his face. He tried to cry out in pain, but the voice lacked a proper exit and came out with a muffled ring to it. When Kihara heard that, he casually tossed the pipe to the side.

“U…gh…”

Despite his hazy consciousness, Accelerator thought.

He had seen this phenomenon before.

With just a touch of his palm, that boy had easily negated the Level 5 powers Accelerator had thought were absolute. That boy had crushed his impenetrable reflection ability and sent heavy blow after heavy blow against his slender body.

Could it be…?

“Did you…develop powers in your own body…?”

“Gya ha ha! No, no, that’s not it at all. Why would I experiment on myself? That’s a job for the guinea pigs. This is nothing so amazing. It doesn’t take that much to crush you even without ridiculous powers. Why would I take such a risk just to crush a single idiot like you? Well?”

“…”

“But damn this feels good. Exterminating insects just puts me in such a good mood. And this is working great today, too.”

As Kihara spoke, he opened and closed the fingers of the micromanipulators.

Accelerator’s shoulders jumped.

It was not over yet.

He could not let himself be defeated so easily.

“Ohh!!”

Accelerator used his vector control to jump up from the ground like a spring. And at the same time he swung his arms with everything he had. The modern cane that had been affixed to his right arm fell away, but he did not care.

He reached his five fingers out toward Kihara Amata.

The first time failed.

But the second time, his fingernails touched Kihara. Accelerator poured in his power. He poured it into the gloves Kihara wore. He focused the vectors on a single point and the mechanical gloves shattered.

The fragments scattered every which way.

“!?”

Accelerator could see the surprised expression on Kihara’s face through the remnants flying through the air.

He jabbed his five fingers out toward that face.

(You’re dead now, you piece of shit!!)

That deadly hand broke through the film of mechanical fragments and shot toward Kihara Amata’s face

But…

“I see, I see. Did you think the secret to my power was in the gloves?”

His voice was perfectly calm.

Kihara easily avoided Accelerator’s strike simply by moving his head to the side.

And his usual smile appeared on his face.

“That’s not it at all! Gya ha ha! Sorry about getting your hopes up like that!!”

A fist stabbed into Accelerator’s side.

The desire to vomit exploded in his stomach, but he forced it back down.

Kihara’s laugh rang in his eardrums.

“Ha ha! *How long are you going to act like you’re the strongest?* You’re nothing but a pile of scrap!!”

Accelerator’s body was doubled over from the previous blow and another fist fell atop his head that was sticking forward a bit. His body collapsed to the ground like a toy.

“Your reflection isn’t an absolute barrier.”

Kihara slowly walked forward.

Accelerator could not move.

“It only reverses the vector of any force heading into it. That makes it simple to beat the shit out of you. I just have to pull back my fist the instant before hitting. You could say the trick is stopping at the last second.”

He sounded like he was enjoying himself.

His smile was that of someone explaining the trick to a piece of stage magic they had thought up.

“You end up *reflecting the fist that is moving away from you.* That means you actually punch yourself. Do you get it now, masochist boy!? Or is it too complex for a little kid to understand!?”

“!!”

Accelerator tried to get up, but Kihara’s foot flew his way before he could.

The sole of Kihara's shoe stomped down on him from above again and again. As the foot stomped on him in various places, his skin was torn and blood mixed in with the rainwater.

(What…?)

He knew Kihara claimed to be using his own power against him. But Accelerator had no idea what exactly it entailed or if it was even possible in reality. However, he did know his reflection was of no use.

"Gahhhh!!"

He tried to control the vectors of the air again, but the dry beeping noise sounded again and it was blown away.

"This is the same," said Kihara. "Your power works by constructing equations for the vectors. That means I just have to throw those equations out of order. You can't control the wind with me around. That kind of control requires a much more complex set of equations than just reflecting. It's the same as program code. The more lines of code, the higher the possibility of a bug…and more room for intentional interference. Basically, I can jam all of your wind attacks by sending a small sound wave out into the air. It just has to have the proper wave and directionality to sneak into a blind spot in your equations. Get it?"

He had pulled out a cell phone…no, it was the strap attached to it. It was made of a soft material and it seemed that it produced a noise when pressed. That was all it took to seal Accelerator's power.

"Damn…it."

"So what's it like being stomped into the mud? I know your characteristics, your equations, your Personal Reality…everything about you. I didn't develop your power for nothing."

Repeated dull sounds of impacts rang out.

A few drops of blood splattered onto Kihara's face.

Kihara continued kicking until he was out of breath and then scraped his bloodstained shoe on the wet road. He treated the stains like the ugliest possible

thing to find on his shoe.

“Hm? Some bugs sure are hard to kill. Hey, come bring that thing out of the van. You know what I mean. The thing shoved in the back. The one covered in dust.”

Kihara lightly stretched out an arm and one of the armored men headed to the back of one of the vans with pained movements. What he pulled out and handed to Kihara was a heavy toolbox filled with things like hammers and saws.

“The cruder and rougher weapons tend to work better. It’s like how a chainsaw meant for lumber gives much more gruesome results than a nonmetal assassin’s knife.”

Accelerator was not able to speak properly from where he lay collapsed on the ground.

He merely looked up at Kihara while the rain fell on him.

“Hey, Accelerator. Did you know the real reason behind her?”

Kihara smiled.

Accelerator could only image he was referring to that small girl.

“Even back at the stage of…what was it again? Oh, right. The Radio Noise development project that came before the Level 6 Shift project. It seemed suspicious from the moment they gave the go sign for those mass produced military models. After all, they should have just made clones of you, the #1, rather than Railgun, the #3.”

“…”

“So why didn’t they clone you? Why did they start with that #3? There has to be something there. Something you don’t know about.”

“Hah,” laughed Accelerator. He then muttered, “You piece of shit.”

Not only was his lip split but everywhere from the space between his teeth to the back of his neck was filled with the flavor of blood.

“Don’t get so worked up over some nonsense when you don’t know as much about that brat as I do.”

“Hm?”

Kihara grinned and grabbed the corners of the heavy toolbox with both hands to see how it felt.

Still smiling, he said, “*How moving. I’m sure she’s delighted to hear it.*”

Accelerator thought his heart was going to stop.

He did not move from his collapsed position.

But he still managed to turn his head just enough.

It was about 100 meters away.

There he saw…

A little girl with one arm held by a man in black and her remaining limbs dangling down.

“That completes the retrieval job.”

Accelerator could hear Kihara Amata’s voice growing more distant.

He could see three people before him while he lay collapsed on the ground. Two were men in black walking side by side. The other was Last Order who was being held like a piece of luggage by one of those men. He held her like she was a plastic bag with something heavy inside. The bottoms of her feet did not reach the ground. Her feet dangled down limply like hanging threads.

He could not see her expression from where he was.

Her head hung down and shook like a tree branch just like her arm and legs, but her bangs hid her expression. However, she did not move an inch despite being in what had to be a painful position. She was most likely unconscious. He had a feeling fresh wounds would be visible on her young body if he got closer.

Holding her by one arm must have been tiring because the man roughly shoved

Last Order toward the other man. Even so, she just hung there limply without making the slightest reaction.

Kihara laughed and said, “Ahh, ahh. I guess she probably couldn’t hear you. Unlike with you, we were told to bring her back alive, but she hardly looks alive to me. I’d rather not have to make a written explanation of how she ended up dead.”

“Quit joking around,” muttered Accelerator under his breath.

She was still alive. There was no way she was dead. If Last Order did die, Accelerator would have noticed since he relied on the Sisters to help carry out his calculations…or so he hoped.

(Damn, I have no proof…)

Accelerator gritted his teeth while lying on the cold ground.

(I have no idea if I would be affected at all if that brat died! I’ve never even thought about the possibility, so of course I don’t know!!)

Paying no heed to Accelerator as he lay battered on the ground, the men holding Last Order’s limp form approached. They were probably heading for the vans.

Kihara had said Last Order was their objective.

Accelerator had no idea where they planned on taking her, but it would all be over once they shoved her into one of the vans.

That girl would once more be dragged down into a world of blood and darkness.

And…

The odds of her coming back again were probably zero.

(I won’t let you.)

Accelerator’s fingers crawled across the ground that was wet with rain.

He gathered up the last bit of power left in his battered body.

“Last Ordeeeeeeeeerrrrrrrrrrrrrrrr!!”

He raised his head and cried out her name.

He had a feeling he saw *the girl’s shoulders give a slight twitch.*

He swung up an arm while lying on the ground.

He could not defeat Kihara Amata with his vector transformation. Even if he created a raging burst of wind by controlling the air, it would immediately be jammed. He could not defeat that man in the lab coat using his normal attack methods. Also, defeating that man was not what he had to focus on now. His priority lay elsewhere.

And so…

“…!!” Accelerator clenched his teeth and slammed his hand against the wet asphalt.

A great sound of destruction rang out.

The tremendous power blasted the asphalt to pieces and the fragments flew in every direction, causing Kihara to move back slightly.

This gave Accelerator an opening of less than a second.

Accelerator used his hand to grasp the wind using that limited time.

A blast of wind surged up as he controlled its vectors.

“Tch!!”

Accelerator heard Kihara click his tongue. The spear of violent wind shot straight by Kihara and straight at Last Order who was being held by a man in black.

The wind speed was 120 m/s.

That wind burst was enough to lift a car or rip a roof off a house. He tore the girl’s small body from the thick arm of the man in black and launched her from the ground. Last Order flew over several buildings that were over 10 meters tall

and disappeared into the background.

An odd coughing noise came from Accelerator's throat.

Before he could even think of suppressing it, he coughed up a mass of blood and his face fell down to the wet road in front of him. Even though he had some battery time left, his consciousness was too faint to lend any focus to the reflection. The rainwater that was mixed with blood and mud flowed in through the corner of his lips and onto his tongue.

"Ahh, ahh, ahh, ahh." Kihara let out a carefree comment. "She's not a golf ball, y'know? You're not supposed to launch people distances that are measured in yards. That was some nice distance, but who's gonna go get her? I'm not doing it."

"What should we do?" quietly said one of the men wearing a black armored outfit.

Kihara scratched his head with his right hand that still had the remnants of the glove on it.

"Hmm… Split into three groups I guess. One group heads after the primary target. The other two stay with me. We've got a lot to do with retrieving the men who were crushed by him and all."

"But our orders had capturing Last Order as our top priority, so shouldn't the groups-…"

"Oh?" Kihara looked at his subordinate with a puzzled look and asked, "You're the guy who was recently brought in to replenish this **Hound Dog**[1] unit, right?"

"No, um…"

"It's fine, it's fine. I'm not trying to pry into your identity. I don't care about the fate of some sweaty guy. But let me fill you in since you don't seem to understand the rules around here." Kihara cleared his throat disinterestedly. "You people are a gathering of trash. You have no rights here. We can replace you with more trash at a moment's notice. If you get in the way of a vitally important mission, I have no problem killing you. Do you get it now? You've already died once. Do you get that?"

The slimy feeling of the raindrops disappeared from the man in black's body.

All discomfort disappeared from him.

"I put the schedule together myself. I racked my brains for the sake of those fucking brats. It's such nonsense. And are you going to make me rack my brains to deal with you too? Hm?"

A chilly feeling seemed to emanate from Kihara's body.

When he saw the man silently take a step back, Kihara nodded.

"Okay, as long as you understand. But we do have some leeway here, so I'll answer your question."

"O-okay. We are supposed to take Last Order alive, but after what happened to her…"

"Oh, I'm sure that brat thought of something. He probably launched her into a river or something."

"Since she was unconscious, she might have drowned if she landed in water…"

"Don't be stupid. The shock of hitting the water would wake her up. And I think she had come to before that anyway. At any rate, check around the area for something that would function as a cushion. Even if she has some skill at running away, she still has the basic specs of a kid. If you still manage to lose sight of her, I'll be holding my sides from laughter."

"Understood," replied a few different voices.

Using only eye and hand signals rather than discussing it, a single group split off and disappeared down a back alley.

Kihara looked down at where Accelerator lay in a puddle.

"Now then."

"Are we going to take him with us too?"

"No, we'll kill him. Seeing someone working hard for that kind of reason really

pisses me off. And we have no reason to capture him. He's a real pain in the ass. It's safest to just kill this kind of gloomy and brooding self-satisfied bastard."

From his tone of voice, one would think he was speaking about a caterpillar on a tree.

One of the armored men held out a handgun, but Kihara shook his head. The countermeasure for Accelerator's reflection could only be accomplished with a subtle reversal of an arm or leg. It could not be replicated with a bullet.

And it was naturally only an attack method that was possible for that man who had directly developed Accelerator's powers. Even if others heard the explanation, they could not pull off the split second timing needed.

Kihara crouched down and lifted up the toolbox.

It was a primitive blunt weapon much heavier than a hammer.

He aimed for Accelerator's battered face like he was trying to crush an empty can sitting on the ground.

"Since you had me off guard for a second, you really should have killed me. I don't know if you were hoping to turn things around with that, but she'll be nice and captured again in 10 minutes."

"…Shut up," spat out Accelerator.

"Oh?"

Kihara's eyes widened. He must not have thought Accelerator was actually still conscious.

"A piece of shit like you…will never understand."

"Is that so? Well, I'll be killing you now, so I hope you like those dying words. It's time for you to become a nasty stain," said Kihara with a sneer.

"Dammit," muttered Accelerator silently.

As Kihara had said, Last Order would definitely be captured at this rate. She

could flee some on her own, but she was overwhelmingly outmatched.

(What is Yomikawa doing? And where is Yoshikawa with that handgun of hers?)

But despite those thoughts, Accelerator knew the answer. They would of course not be coming. There was no way they would conveniently show up. If people showed up like puzzle pieces to complete a means of resolving the situation whenever you were faced with something you could not handle alone, no one would ever have any real problems. Some said humanity was one big family. They said everyone could laugh together and be happy. But that exceedingly kind illusion would never actually happen.

(…Someone.)

Even so, Accelerator continued to think.

(Give me a lucky illusion… I'll give you all the credit. You can trample over me and make fun of me all you want.)

He looked horribly pathetic lying on the wet ground with his skull about to be smashed.

(Someone…anyone…save that brat…)

He knew his hopes would never reach anyone.

Kihara mercilessly swung down the toolbox hammer.

But just before it hit…

"What are you doing there?"

"Ah?" said Kihara as he stopped his arms.

The armored men turned toward the voice.

It had come from less than 20 meters away. The person must have suddenly come out of one of the narrow side paths. The figure stood in the pouring rain of the night without an umbrella. The light of the streetlights dimly reflected off of the figure.

The figure had silver hair long enough to reach her waist, pure white skin, and green eyes. She wore an extravagant white nun's habit with gold embroideries that looked like a teacup. But the clothes were held together in places by safety pins, giving them a very imbalanced look. In her arms was a calico cat that looked completely out of place in that strained world.

Accelerator recalled something as he lay collapsed on the ground.

He recalled her.

He recalled her name.

Part 2

"Dammit, Index. Why do you have to disappear right after we meet up? Where did you get off to?" muttered Kamijou Touma as he glanced around every which way.

The underground mall was relatively empty since the curfew had passed. It was still a world of bright fluorescent lights where day and night were indistinguishable and the weather was a complete mystery, but the changes in the flow of people and the type of music played in the stores gave some sense of the flow of time.

Kamijou was not even sure why Index had left the student dorm and headed to the underground mall.

When they had met up, their conversation had been as follows:

"Academy City's structure is so complicated, annoying, and confusing. It was really hard finding you, Touma. But that's fine now. Let's get home, okay?"

"Wait, why did you go to so much trouble to find me? …Well, if I had to take a guess, I'd say you were hungry."

“Touma, you idiot!”

“Gwahh!! Did you just try to bite me all of a sudden!?”

“If you think the only reason I do anything is because I’m hungry, you are sorely mistaken!!”

“Yeah, but the times when you do things for any other reason are the exceptions!!”

“You are too inconsiderate, Touma. The white-haired guy I met before coming here fed me hamburgers without even asking about my situation. You need to be as nice as him.”

“Is that so? Well, I have nothing to do with someone like that. Oh, did you actually thank him? And did he give you anything else?”

“Mh. Yes, I thanked him. But now that you mention it, he did lend me this.”

“Oh, it’s just some pocket tissues.”

“Ah! He must be having trouble right now without this cutting edge daily item! T-Touma, I need to go return this!!”

“Eh? But it’s just some tissues. And I doubt he wants them back after you’ve wadded them up like-…wait, stop running off and listen to me, Index!!”

It would have been quickest to call her cell phone, but that nun had likely left it off as usual. Kamijou wandered around the underground mall and poked his head inside a nearby fast food restaurant and other stores, but he did not find Index.

(She seemed to be looking for someone. Maybe she figured he isn’t down here anymore so she went up to the surface.)

Then again, that nun had a perfect memory, so there may have been no real reason to think she would get lost in Academy City.

Kamijou headed up the stairs and left the underground mall.

“Huh!? It’s raining…” muttered Kamijou as he looked up into the night sky.

The falling raindrops were soaking the black road surface. It was the end of September, so the air had grown quite cold.

(I don’t think I had a futon hanging out to dry. I hope Index remembered to close the window before leaving, though. Well, finding Index comes first.)

Kamijou headed off at random while still looking up at the night sky that was covered with a thick layer of clouds. It was raining, but not enough to need an umbrella. When he thought about how near his dorm was and the fact that the dorm umbrella stand was full because he would buy a cheap convenience store umbrella whenever it rained, he really did not feel like heading back to the underground mall to buy some rain gear.

(Is it just me or are there a lot of Anti-Skill members around here?)

Whether due to the time of day or the weather, there were surprisingly few students on the dark road. The only people he saw walking around were Anti-Skill.

The Anti-Skill members wandering around wore defensive armor made of layered plastic and shock absorbing polyurethane. Their equipment had to be waterproof, but Kamijou felt a bit sorry for them when he saw them walking around in the cold rain without an umbrella.

(Hmm. If we’re out here late enough, they’ll probably try to lead us home. I know how to slip past them…but Index doesn’t. And after speaking to her, they would probably take her to an Anti-Skill station. I need to take her home before this becomes a problem.)

Kamijou was just about to look away from the Anti-Skill members.

But before he did…

He heard an odd noise.

“…?”

Kamijou stopped moving.

An Anti-Skill member covered in defensive equipment had suddenly collapsed to the ground without warning. As he lay face down, the man sank into a puddle on the wet road. And yet he did not move an inch. No matter how waterproofed that equipment was, that was not a normal reaction. For example, would anyone be stupid enough to leap straight into a water puddle while wearing a raincoat?

(…Is he unconscious?)

Kamijou had no idea how uncomfortable the official Anti-Skill uniform was.

But if it was anything like a mascot suit at a theme park, the wearer could easily end up dehydrated and with heatstroke. Kamijou felt a bit chilly, but it was possible things were different for a person wearing all that thick equipment.

(Not good.)

Kamijou's gaze raced around the area.

There were no normal students around, but there were plenty of other Anti-Skill members.

Even so, Kamijou still headed for the collapsed man.

And then…

It started happening all over the place

Kamijou heard a thudding noise. It was the sound of a human collapsing to the ground. And it did not stop there. He heard the sound again and again and again.

"Wha-…?"

Kamijou looked around in confusion and then froze in place.

All of the Anti-Skill members patrolling the road had collapsed. They had not been struck by any kind of impact. They had simply collapsed to the ground. And yet they were not moving a finger or even trembling slightly. Kamijou could tell even from a distance. They had been rendered completely unconscious.

“Wait…what the hell is going on!?”

He now frantically ran forward.

He headed for the first Anti-Skill member that had collapsed. The one who had collapsed face down in a puddle seemed to be a man. Kamijou thought he might suffocate in his current state, so he moved the man out of the puddle and rolled him face up.

The man’s body was heavy.

Kamijou could not tell whether it was due to all his gear or if the man was simply heavy.

(What about the others…?)

He ran around, but none of the others seemed in danger of suffocating. He wanted to drag them all to the underground mall, but he simply did not have the strength. A human was as heavy as a sandbag.

He would also have trouble calling in people to help. He was on a fairly major road, but Academy City was essentially a collection of school districts. With the exception of the entertainment districts for the teachers, most everything shut down at sunset. The only stores with lights on in the area were the convenience stores and restaurants that had been given permission to remain open at night. The last train and bus had already left and not a single car was driving down the road with 3 lanes on either side. It could not have felt more hopeless. So many people had collapsed and yet there was no sign of it causing a disturbance. Kamijou felt he needed to abandon the idea of anyone else doing something about it.

(This is the kind of situation Anti-Skill is supposed to deal with…)

Kamijou peered own at the face of one of the Anti-Skill members.

His body was so thoroughly covered in nonmetallic parts that Kamijou would not be able to tell if he was injured without removing them. But at the very least, his clothing did not appear to be dyed with red. Kamijou placed his hand against the man’s neck to see if he had a pulse as he had seen done in movies. Kamijou felt the reassuring sign of that pulse of life. He placed his hand across the man’s

mouth and felt him breathing.

As far as Kamijou could tell, the man's life was not in danger.

But if he was not injured, what had caused this?

(Was it some kind of knockout gas? No…)

If so, Kamijou could not explain how he alone was fine.

At any rate, this was not something an amateur like him should be making a judgment on.

He had to call an ambulance.

Kamijou pulled out his cell phone, dialed a three digit number, and was connected to the call center. Merely pressing the call button to that emergency number made him nervous, but this was not the first time he had called it. His mind was in a state of confusion, but he somehow managed to explain the situation.

Afterwards, he closed his folding cell phone.

After standing up, he put the phone into his pocket.

And then…

"…Ksshh…"

He heard static coming from the ground. Kamijou looked down. The collapsed Anti-Skill member was still completely motionless. What sounded like static over a radio was coming from his shoulder.

"Kssshhh….to the city. I repeat…kssshhh!! …The gate has been destroyed! The intruder is headed for the urban area… Can anyone here me? My unit was taken out by an unknown atta-…gwah!?"

The sound cut off with a noise like a TV being turned off.

The sound had been coming from a radio. The speaker had likely been another Anti-Skill member located elsewhere. Kamijou was worried about the man's

situation, but the rectangular device was now producing nothing but flat static. At first glance, it looked like an undecorated cell phone, but it must have worked completely differently. Kamijou felt no desire to touch it.

(What was that…?)

Kamijou looked around.

He recalled one of the staticky words he had heard.

(…Intruder.)

That meant someone had come to Academy City from outside. He had no way of knowing if that was related to the collapsed Anti-Skill members before his eyes. But whether it was or not, the same fear entered Kamijou's mind.

(Is Index okay…?)

Not all enemies of Academy City were necessarily magicians, and not all magicians were necessarily after Index. But she was still the first thing that came to his mind.

(Not good.)

Kamijou's thoughts changed course.

Just in case, he felt it would be best to meet up with her as quickly as possible even if just to see she was safe.

But then…

"?"

Kamijou felt a small impact against his gut.

It seemed someone had run into him…but the impact had been oddly low. It had been at the bottom of his gut rather than in the chest.

He looked down.

It had been a small child that had run into him. She was quite a bit shorter than

Kamijou. She looked to be about 10 years old. She had almost shoulder length brown hair.

He was pretty sure her name was…

“Last Order, right?”

“Uuh…” came her moaning reply.

Her reply was muffled because she had her small face pressed up against Kamijou’s shirt. It seemed more that she was clinging to him than that she had bumped into him. Even through his shirt, he could feel that she was trembling and that her body temperature had fallen due to the rain. She was a lot wetter than he would have thought possible from the sprinkling rain.

(What happened?)

Kamijou looked puzzled.

“Help…”

Last Order looked up at Kamijou while clinging to his shirt.

Her large eyes were horribly bloodshot and a clear liquid flowed onto her cheek.

Even though the rain was still falling on her, the line running down her cheek was clearly different.

She…

She cried out…

“Please, help him! says Misaka as Misaka begs you!!”

Two girls crossed paths, connecting the paths to two different espers.

Those two paths should have been perfectly parallel lines that never crossed.

When their paths gather at a single point, the true story begins with Academy

City as its stage.

Between the lines 5

People collapsed one after another.

Amid the cold rain, the only sound ringing through the streets during that dark, dark night was that of bodies collapsing without resistance, without any great noise, without shed blood, and without a single scream. They were all adults wearing armored outfits designed to absorb shocks. The bright light of the streetlights reflected off the firearms that sank into puddles.

They were members of Anti-Skill, the group in charge of Academy City's law and order.

After collapsing, they did not move.

Not even a finger.

Meanwhile, the sound of small footsteps could be heard.

The slender silhouette of a woman walked through the rainy city while weaving between the victims who lay collapsed and motionless on the wet roadway.

The woman who appeared below the streetlights did not have an umbrella. The narrow, threadlike rain struck her slim feminine form. She wore a women's outfit called a kirtle that the dress was originally based off of, a narrow leather belt around the waist, and detachable sleeves that extended from her wrists to her upper arms. They looked something like a gaudier version of what bank and post office workers wore on their arms. On her head, she wore a headdress made of a single piece of cloth that completely covered her hair.

Someone with a bit of an interest in history or archeology might have recognized her outfit as that of French townspeople at around the 15th century.

But since it was primarily colored a bright yellow, it could hardly be called historically accurate.

The sound of metallic objects clinking together could be heard.

They were coming from the piercings on her face. Not only did she have piercings in her ears, but also on her nose, lips, and eyelids. When she parted her lips and stuck out her tongue, a chain fell out. The narrow necklace-like chain was attached to a piercing in the tip of her tongue and it stretched down to her waist. An accessory modeled after a cross hung at the end.

She had gone through with all of that in full knowledge that it would ruin her features.

In the Christian Church, the idea of piercing oneself with metal had deep meaning. The Son of God had died a martyr after being pierced by nails and a spear. If you carefully chose the places pierced, it was possible to freely put together different spells.

“Hm.”

The woman with holes in her face looked around the area and then kicked up a radio lying on the ground near her feet. She caught the rectangular device in one hand as it flew through the air. She frowned slightly when she felt the muddy water on it.

After spinning it around in her hand like a handgun, she brought the radio’s microphone up to her mouth.

She spoke as if whispering in someone’s ear.

“Hiiiii, Aleister.”

All she received in reply was the staticky voice of a bewildered Anti-Skill member. But she ignored him and continued speaking to someone who did not seem to be listening.

“I’m sure you can cut in on these normal lines. I’d like it if you would hurry up and speak with me.”

She then heard the sound of the line being switched over.

The sound quality grew much clearer.

“What do you want?” asked a new voice.

“If you’re willing to listen, I figure we can have a chat.”

“Just to be sure… Do you really think I will fall for such a low level provocation?”

“Oh? I crush three of your board of directors and you still call it ‘low level’?”

The woman spun the radio around in her hand.

A bit of disappointment was visible on her face.

“There are only 12 members of the board of directors, right?”

“They can be replaced. All of them if necessary.”

“Now that isn’t what I wanted to hear.”

“And I have the power to make them give in to me.”

“Y’know, Aleister. I had thought you didn’t actually exist. I thought you might be some kind of hologram or some strange machinery jammed inside a corpse.”

“Such fantastical ideas. You are more suited to being an inventor than a scientist.”

“I had decided that your views were just the combined views of the board of directors, but it looks like I was wrong. You’re showing no sign of panic.” The woman then muttered quietly, “Maybe I need to crush a few more members of the board of directors.”

The person on the other end of the radio did not say anything to stop her.

It was as if he was announcing that kind of threat meant nothing to him.

“Well, whatever. Do you know who I am?”

“No, but I am having your identity investigated as an insurgent.”

“God’s Right Seat.”

The woman smoothly voiced the name of one of the deepest portions of the magic side.

That was a name that sank into the deepest, deepest, deepest, deepest, deepest, deepest, deepest, deepest, deepest darkness of the Roman Catholic Church. Only a handful of the 2 billion members of that world’s largest sect knew of its existence, and even those that did would be immediately executed if they were deemed unworthy of that knowledge. That was how steeped in secrecy that term was.

But Aleister smoothly replied.

His voice displayed no emotion.

“Oh? I vaguely remember hearing about a terrorist group with that name.”

“Hmm.”

“If you are only trying to make a name for yourself, don’t you think this is a bit too reckless?”

“You can feign ignorance if you like, but at the very, very end, try not to regret not begging for your life here.”

“Are you sure you are not taking this city too lightly?”

“Oh? Are you not aware what state your city is in? Has it already lost the ability to send out reports? My bad, my bad. I have no way of counting how many enemies I crush. Ha ha. I guess the operators have collapsed too.”

“…”

“60%. 70%. 80% is probably going too far. But either way, 100% will have collapsed before long. Anti-Skill and Judgment is what you call them, right? I’ll have your head before long since you only have those pathetic things to protect you. I hope you understand that it’s all over for you.”

“Heh.”

“?”

“If you honestly think that is enough to break Academy City’s defensive network, you truly are naïve. *It seems you understand nothing about the true form of this city.*”

“Is that so?”

“You are not the only one to have a trick up your sleeve. And you might be taken out before you even realize it.”

“No matter who they are, I can crush anyone who opposes me. That was decided from the moment I was born.”

It looked as if the two were holding a conversation, but each one was only speaking one-sidedly to the other.

The woman brought the wet and muddy radio closer to her mouth.

“I am Vento of the Front. The ultimate weapon among 2 billion people.” She gave her ultimatum. “I will crush everything tonight. You, Academy City, Imagine Breaker, the Index Librorum Prohibitorum…everything.”

With those words, the woman naming herself Vento crushed the radio in her grip.

The “human” named Aleister was inside a room of the windowless building.

A cylindrical life support device was placed prominently in the middle of the square space. He floated upside down inside. The red liquid filling the cylinder soaked into his entire body through his mouth and nose. It interfered with every single cell in his body.

The room had no proper illumination. Normally, the only lights were the small pilot lamps for the machines filling the walls of the large square room. Those lights would look like stars in the night sky. However, the large space was now

illuminated by red warning lights that were intermittently flashing.

As stated before, the room had no proper illumination.

The red light was being produced by the countless errors displayed on the many monitors. That meant there were enough anomalies occurring throughout Academy City to produce that much light.

It was all caused by a single magician.

It was all caused by a single member of God's Right Seat.

She had caused all this in Academy City, the city that had remained unshaken even by that Croce di Pietro.

"…"

In just a few dozen minutes, about 70% of Anti-Skill, the group meant to keep the peace in Academy City, had fallen victim to attack. Their life signals showed none had died, but if that windowless building fell before they came to, it did not matter. Transmissions reporting damage or requesting aid were being sent from around the city, but it would be too much trouble to reply to every single one.

The city was dying.

But…

Even so…

The expression that appeared on the "human" named Aleister's face was a smile.

It was an unexplainable smile in which any and all emotions could be seen yet to which none seemed to fit.

“Interesting,” he whispered. “Most interesting. This is why I cannot give up on life. It looks like an opportunity to use it has arrived. The timing is a bit too early…but when bound to a plan, irregularities are the greatest entertainment.”

As he seemed to toy with those feelings by rolling over them in his mouth, Aleister sent countless commands from within the life support device and to the meters outside. He took control of a radio transmitter and sent out a passcode on a certain frequency to contact those that crawled through the darkness of Academy City.

“Hound Dog…Kihara Amata,” said Aleister.

After a brief reply, he gave further orders.

“It is time for the Imaginary Number District - Five Elements Institution…The AIM diffusion field. It may be a bit early, but use **Fuse Kazakiri** to crush 'them'. Blow off her arms and legs if necessary, but recapture Serial Number 20001 and immediately take her to the specified point. …Be quick but courteous.” With a

smile, he added, “Now, it is time for a long-awaited and wonderful, wonderful show.”

Notes

1. ↑ **Kanji:** Hunting Dog Unit

Afterword

To those who have been buying each volume one at a time: welcome back.

To those who bought all 12 volumes at once: welcome.

This is Kamachi Kazuma.

This is (supposedly) a series where comedy and battles cross paths, but this volume was focused on the comedy. I feel it was nice and heartwarming through and through. I came back to Misaka Mikoto's punishment game that wasn't touched on in Volume 11. Sometimes this kind of atmosphere that lacks any real conflict is nice.

The theme this time was the changing of clothes.

There is the literal example of the characters changing from their summer uniforms into their winter uniforms, but you could also say the overall flow of the series itself is "changing its clothes" in various places with the appearance of a certain character (or rather, group).

Since this occurred mostly within Academy City, it mostly became a science side story. So…well, that white boy is the same as always. I think he will be appearing more and more from now on.

I give my thanks to my illustrator Haimura-san and my editor Miki-san. This volume came with the annoyance of the characters changing their clothes, so I am truly thankful they stuck with me.

And I give my thanks to the readers. It is wholly thanks to all of you that I am even writing this afterword.

Now it is time to close the pages for now while praying that the pages of the next

book will be opened.

And I lay my pen down for now.

Th-the punishment isn’t over yet!

-Kamachi Kazuma

Toaru Majutsu no Index — Volume 12

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